THE WORLD TWILIGHT

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د ملوم كلية الفنون - حائز على ميدالية ذهبية

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The World of Twilight



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Essays and Poems by

SUDHINDRANATH DATTA

Essays

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Sudhindranath DATTA 1901–1960

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Foreword

I first met Sudhin Datta in Calcutta in 1934, when I was working on the Calcutta *Statesman*, and saw him from time to time, in India or in Europe, until his death in 1960. In Calcutta there were five of us who met regularly and became close friends—Tulsi Goswami, Apurbo Chanda, Shahid Suhrawardy, Sudhin and myself. Now, alas, all are dead save me.

Sudhin delighted me from the beginning. He had about him a special elegance, or grace, which is unforgettable. It was not just that he was exceptionally good-looking, and had an exceptional sweetness of disposition which showed itself in his expression and way of speaking. His whole being was full of a kind of gentle serenity which made his company restful and rewarding.

I cannot, of course, pronounce upon his merits as a Bengali poet and writer, though I know how highly he was esteemed. In English, both in the written and the spoken word, he was rarely gifted—more so, I should say, than any other Indian I have known or read.

It is not, however, merely Sudhin's gifts which make him so memorable a person, so that I sense his warm human presence now, writing these words nearly a decade after his death, as vividly as when he was alive. How can I describe it? The tall, graceful form, the very characteristic voice so fastidious in its choice of words, the slight touch of melancholy which all have who do not feel themselves quite at home here on earth, the warmth of his smile and perfection of his manners.

A great deal of inglorious claptrap, now for the most part mercifully forgotten, has been talked about the enrichment of Indian and Western culture through their accidental commingling in the days of the British Raj. It might even be said that the proposition is intrinsically absurd in that neither culture exists any more to commingle or run separately. Yet

it is true that Sudhin exemplified to a high degree the possibility of marrying Indian and Western values and ways of thought without either the excessive pedantry or the Maharishi-like buffoonery which all too often accompanies such endeavour. He was as perfectly at ease in London or Paris as in Calcutta or New Delhi; he wore a European suit as gracefully as a *dhoti*, to the point that one scarcely noticed in which he happened to be attired.

The days of our friendship in India seem as distant now as the Great Moghul. Those interminable discussions the five of us had about *Swaraj* and the renaissance it would bring to pass (not that any of us *really* believed in that) have as little present relevance as Paley's *Evidences*. Already most people have forgotten there ever was a British Raj, which after all only lasted a very short time and had a very trifling impact. Anglo-India is over and done with for ever, and even its most majestic figures like Gandhi and Tagore belong to the shadows.

I put Sudhin in a different category. He never wholly identified himself with any political or literary movement. Essentially, and in the truest sense, he was an individual, at home everywhere—and nowhere, which comes to the same thing. It is a great joy to me that something of him and his work should be perpetuated in this volume, and I esteem it a signal honour to have been asked to contribute a Foreword, registering my love for him, and belief that others who did not know him in the flesh will meet him in these pages.

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

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I would also like to thank my brother-in-law, Sourindranath Datta, Executor and Trustee of the Estate of my husband, for his co-operation in making the publication of this book possible.

Finally, I am grateful to the following for permission to reproduce the works mentioned: Orient Longmans Ltd for the essay on Jamini Roy, which was published in an abbreviated form in *Longmans' Miscellany 1943* and for the poems 'Camel-Bird', 'Antinomies' and 'The Fool', which were published in *Longmans' Miscellany No. 4*; *Encounter* for 'Calcutta' which appeared as an article in June, 1957; *Quest* for 'Hugo and Others' which appeared as an article in July, 1960; Faber & Faber Ltd for two extracts from T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and for Section IV of Ezra Pound's 'Ode Pour l' election de son Sepulchre'; Laurence Pollinger Ltd and the Estate of the late Mrs Frieda Lawrence for D. H. Lawrence's poem 'And Oh—That the Man I am might cease to be—'; and Shri Kamakshiprasad Chattopadhyaya for the photograph which has been used for the frontispiece.

R. D.

Contents

(*With the exception of 'Independence Day' which was written in English, all the poems are translations from Bengali by the author.*)

Plates

Introduction

I

Sudhindranath Datta was just short of sixty when he died on the 25th June 1960. He died suddenly after returning from a party, where as always he had charmed the company by his courteous and playful raillery. He had returned to Calcutta only about a year before from a stay of nearly two years in the United States and England. He left behind the unfinished autobiography which forms the first part of the present collection of his prose and verse. He began it in Chicago, where, under my urging, he worked at it steadily, day by day in a room across from mine. He composed slowly; each sentence was pondered over and recast many times until it contained the right balance of antithesis and the right rhythm. He arrived each day before noon and wrote with little interruption until six o'clock. He did this for five days each week from late in 1957 until the end of spring 1958. With so much continuous and meticulous application of his talents he completed only the account of his parents and their families.

In June 1958 he went to New York; in August he went to London. While he was in London there were so many friends from Calcutta to see: John Auden, 'Sinbad' Sinclair, Oscar Skilbeck, Malcolm Muggeridge, Cyprian Blagden, were only a few of them. His handsome visage, his charming manners, his deep and melodious voice and his wit brought him into contact with many new persons whom he had not known before. As a result, the autobiography remained practically where it was on his departure from the United States. In Calcutta, resettling after a long absence, taking up connections with old friends, lecturing on comparative literature at the Jadavpur University, which entailed the re-reading of much English, German and French literature which he had not read since

the '20s and '30s, and looking after the publication of new editions of his prose and verse took up all his time. I saw him last in Calcutta in January 1960; he assured me as we waited at dawn in the waiting-room of the Air India air terminal on Chittaranjan Avenue that he would soon return to his autobiography.

Unfortunately, his life continued to be as full of distractions over the next six months as it had been ever since his return, and the richly fascinating opening chapters were left to be published posthumously. These early sections, fragments though they are, will surely take their place with Mr Nirad Chaudhuri's *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* as a classic of their own genre and as a poignant evocation of the mode of life and outlook of the educated and prosperous class of Bengalis at the beginning of the present century. Nonetheless, because the autobiography was unfinished, I have been asked to provide a biographical note about the author of the essays and poems, which together with the autobiographical chapters make up the book which follows. I shall do only this. An assessment of his accomplishment as a poet and his importance in the history of Bengali culture in the twentieth century must be left to others.[1]

II

Sudhin Datta was born in Calcutta on the 30th October 1901. His family, both on his father's and his mother's sides are wonderfully described in *The World of Twilight* and there is little I can add to what he himself has written. His father, who died in 1942, was one of the foremost solicitors of the Calcutta High Court and was not only a man of great learning but also a patron of literature through his role in the Bengali Academy of Letters, and a friend of men of letters. His father was a staunch nationalist with a rich appreciation of English

[1] A brief and perspicacious account of Sudhin Datta's poetry and prose is to be found in Buddhadeva Bose: *An Acre of Green Grass, a Review of Modern Bengali Literature*. (Orient Longmans, 1948).

literature and British justice. At home, Sudhin always spoke English to his father and brothers. Indeed, in his youth he spoke Bengali less fluently than he spoke English.

As a result of his father's political and religious sympathies with Mrs Annie Besant, Sudhin was sent to the Theosophical High School in Benares, where English was the medium of instruction. It was one of the leading secondary schools in India and he remained there from 1913 to 1918. In 1918 he went to the Scottish Church College, one of the better among the numerous colleges affiliated to the University of Calcutta. In 1922 he took his degree with distinction in history and English. He was, as he indicates in his autobiography, articled as a solicitor's clerk from the time he took his degree until 1927. He did not, however, sit for the examination which would have qualified him to be a solicitor; he had been bored by his legal studies throughout the entire five years, and at the moment when he was to commit himself to a legal career, he drew back. His father had wished him to become a solicitor and was unhappy about his decision: but his affection and tolerance for his son were great and what Sudhin feared might be a crisis passed smoothly. He had already begun to see himself as a writer; from 1920 onward he contributed Bengali verse and English articles to a variety of Calcutta reviews, and during his period of service at the solicitor's office he had come more and more to an awareness of his talents and his calling in literature. I do not know the details of how he first came to the attention of Rabindranath Tagore, but quite early on he attracted the interest of 'the poet', and he always enjoyed the fatherly pride and the solicitude of the older man. In February 1929, Sudhin Datta embarked with Tagore on an extended journey which took him to Ceylon, Malaya, China, Japan, Canada and the United States. They stayed a time in Chicago, where they were warmly received by Miss Harriet Monroe and her circle, the contributors and patrons of *Poetry* which was then, as it had been for nearly two decades, a major platform of poetic innovation. Tagore returned to India. Sudhin stayed in New York for about a month and then spent a longer time

in Great Britain, France and Germany, where he saw the beginning of the rise to power of the Nazis, and where he once came into an altercation with some parading Nazi marchers who assailed him for refusing to give the 'Heil Hitler' salute. He extracted himself through a characteristically sardonic insistence that as '*ein Urarier*' there was no need for him to do so. In London, where he spent six months, he struggled at first to overcome his distrust of Britain. In India he had combined without conflict a warm admiration for British culture and for the British contribution to modern India with an earnest desire for India to be free from British rule. In his circle of friends in Calcutta he had often been the only one to insist on the positive benefits which India has received from Britain—the English language, 'our nationality and our own past and traditions', as he put it to me many years later.

Returning to India in December 1929, he had to find a way of supporting himself. Although his father was a man of considerable wealth and Sudhin might, at that time, have lived comfortably on what his father provided, he insisted on holding paid employment. He became the secretary of the Light of Asia Insurance Company, and he continued in this capacity for nearly three years. While engaged in these mundane pursuits, he laid plans for a new literary and critical review which would bring together the most advanced accomplishments in literature and thought in Bengal and the rest of the world. The review was to be a quarterly and it was to be named *Parichaya*. It appeared for the first time in 1931 and its success was immediate; it also made its way financially. After five years as a quarterly it became a monthly, and it continued to render Bengali thought more sophisticated, more discriminating and better informed. In 1936 a writer in *The Times Literary Supplement* (London) wrote that *Parichaya* 'marks the definite passing of Indian literary criticism into the modern world...it has set itself far above anything else in Indian periodical literature, in catholicity, range, intelligence and freedom from prejudice.' A typical number that year contained a long analysis of Fascism and detailed articles on the Chinese renaissance, cer-

tain Hindu minor philosophical texts, the poetry of Hugh McDiarmid and R. C. Trevelyan and a detailed analysis of T. S. Eliot's *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral*. It restored to Bengali intellectual life the cosmopolitanism it had possessed in the nineteenth century, and it did so on a more refined and more adventurous plane. It was not simply a channel for European thought and literature; it was at all times a genuinely Bengali accomplishment.

His commercial and editorial activities did not confine his creative powers. He had already published one book of verse, *Tanvi*, in 1930. The ensuing decade saw an extraordinary efflorescence of his genius. Within a relatively short time he published three volumes of verse, *Orchestra* (1935), *Krandasi* (1937) and *Uttarphalguni* (1941), and one volume of prose, *Swagata* (1939).

III

In his youth, Sudhin Datta had been stirred by the Russian Revolution which he thought betokened a great empancipation of the creative powers of the human race. He was not a Marxist or even a socialist, and he was never drawn to them later. His sympathies with the Russian Revolution—shared throughout Bengal—derived from its evocation of a vision of a similarly agricultural and backward India aroused from its torpor and released from bondage. Politically, he was a liberal with broad sympathies with radicals and conservatives. Fundamentally he was detached and dispassionate in his political interests and even to extremists—self-alleged revolutionaries and actual reactionaries—he spoke in his characteristically mocking, upbraiding way.

The coming of the war complicated Sudhin Datta's relations with his contemporaries. Like practically all educated men of the 1930s in India and Western Europe and America, Sudhin Datta was repelled by Italian Fascism and German National Socialism. This was the period of the popular front agitation of the Communists, and in England and in the main cities of

India, it was the period of the Left Book Club of Victor Gollancz, John Strachey and Harold Laski. In India, opposition to British rule was reinforced by Marxism which provided a more universalistic theoretical foundation for nationalism. The engagement in European affairs which had been vivid among Bengali intellectuals ever since the early part of the nineteenth century, became even more pronounced in the 1930s; the various mixtures of Marxism and nationalism heightened the sense of affinity with Marxist currents of thought and the related political movements in Europe. In a certain way the young intellectuals of Bengal shared the culture of Europe. Sudhin Datta was like many Bengali intellectuals at that time in his participation of European culture, in his knowledge of European literature, art and thought; he differed from most of them, however, by the greater intimacy of his knowledge of cultural developments in France and Germany through his sojourn in those countries and through his independence of translations into English and second-hand English accounts. He differed also from the majority in that he did not share the more or less Marxist political outlook of his contemporaries—Gandhism had no attraction to the circles in which he and his contemporaries moved. Despite their differences in direction and intensity of political outlook, however, Sudhin Datta remained on good terms with Bengali intellectuals, whatever their politics. He himself, generous, patient, affectionate and sceptical, was capable of the utmost courtesy and considerateness towards everyone, regardless of their political attitude, affiliations or conduct. (His own conduct might be illustrated by the fact that during the 1920s, on several occasions, while riding in public transport in Calcutta, a dhoti-clad Gandhian boarded the bus and seeing Sudhin dressed, as he always was when weather permitted, in a perfectly tailored suit of British cut, remonstrated at such 'un-Indian' conduct, and announced that he would rather leave the bus than ride with one so unfaithful to the Motherland. Rather than permit his preference for a given style of dress to inconvenience other persons, he left the vehicle.)

When war broke out in Europe in 1939, Sudhin Datta continued to maintain his anti-Nazi and anti-Fascist attitude and he therefore accepted the necessity of war and hoped for victory over the Nazis and the Fascists. As he put it many years later: 'having made so much fuss' about the Nazis and the Fascists in the 1930s, he could not withold his support from a war fought against them. The communists, fellow-travellers and non-Marxist nationalists opposed India's participation in the war, and some even desired the defeat of the Western allies and rejoiced in the reverses which the allies suffered in the early stages. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the communists changed their line and became great supporters of the war effort. He did not approve of their hypocrisy. Having himself supported the war from the beginning, he took a step which was almost unique among Bengali intellectuals; he tried to enlist in the army. When he was found too old for the active military service, he joined the Air Raids Protection Service, Calcutta as Deputy-Officer-in-Charge, Communications Service, and in March 1943 he become head of the service. In this role he had, in addition to many operational and administrative services in an extremely agitated atmosphere—there was much apprehension in Bengal over the threat of Japanese air attack—also to cope with the misunderstanding of old friends and colleagues who disapproved of his acceptance of employment by the Raj. Nonetheless, this crisis too was weathered without damage to his personal relationships or literary reputation. Although he disposed of *Parichaya* in 1943, he continued his literary efforts, but at a greatly diminished pace. In addition to his poetic efforts, he contributed several articles to the admirable *Longman's Miscellany* which was edited by Cyprian Blagden.

IV

In September 1945, when A.R.P. in Calcutta was wound up, he became assistant editor and leader writer of *The Statesman*

(Calcutta). In the leaders which he wrote, the carefully meditated balance of his sentences became a fit vehicle for his moral uprightness, his fearlessness and his understanding of the fecklessness and madness of human beings. The pain which he experienced at the sight and thought of his starving fellow countrymen in the great famine was deepened by the experience of the great Calcutta killing. Although his intensive study of Sanskrit language and literature strengthened his sense of vital affinity with Hindu culture, he did not discriminate Muslims from his Hindu fellow-Bengalis—Shahid Suhrawardy was one of his most beloved friends. The sight of the slaughter of so many innocent Muslims by self-righteous Hindu zealots only confirmed his own ironic detachment from uncritically and passionately espoused beliefs. Daily contact with the turbulence of India's partition and the first years of independence only made more acute his sombre appreciation of the reverse side of every virtue and every achievement. He grieved profoundly at the chaos in his country—the assassination of Gandhi was particularly distressing to him—and for a time, perhaps the only time in his life, he thought of emigrating from India. He submitted an application for a lectureship in Bengali at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, but nothing came of it. I learned of this after his death and do not know what were the reasons for his decision to apply for the post. Although he had a moderate private income, he had always to supplement by his earnings. It is possible that he anticipated economic catastrophe in India; it might be that he was restless in his work at *The Statesman*. It is even possible that the convulsions which attended independence caused his attachment to India to waver for a time. If so, it must have been the only time in his life that such a thing happened. Sudhin Datta was not one of those 'ambivalent', 'uprooted', 'alienated' Indian intellectuals so often reported by superficial observers. He suffered from no 'crisis of identity'. His attachment to India was profound and firm; it was unquestioned. There was nothing about him of the marginal man, suspended between two civilizations, belonging

to neither. He was not like Jawaharlal Nehru who saw himself as a 'queer mixture of East and West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere. . . .a stranger and an alien in the West, I cannot be of it. But in my own country also, sometimes, I have an exile's feeling.' (*An Autobiography*, London, 1936, pp. 597-98). Sudhin Datta was no exile anywhere. He was at home everywhere—in London and in Chicago, but above all and most certainly in Calcutta. Sudhin Datta often criticized one aspect or another of Indian life: he did not share the religious beliefs of his fathers, nor the passionate, all-dominating nationalist preoccupations of some of his contemporaries and friends: he was not a leftist when it was almost mandatory for a modern Indian intellectual to be a leftist. These divergences from the prevalent outlook of the past and present were made more possible by the inner freedom of a man with firm attachment, and that is why, in speaking of India, he never flaunted his nationality aggressively or shamefacedly derogated his country. Nonetheless, Sudhin Datta suffered acutely the troubles of post-Independence Calcutta. The griefs of the famine, the slaughters, the partition of Bengal, the streets, alleyways and stairwells full of refugees, all made untenable the exhilaration of the 1930s. Independence also wounded the complex and tense bond which in Calcutta had held together the cultures of Bengal and Europe. Sudhin Datta's important role as one who held both cultures together was somehow damaged. Political partisanship—particularly among intellectuals—became even more severe than it had been before the war; some Bengali intellectuals weighed down by the terrible miseries of their beloved province and pessimistic and sad about its future, became more self-preoccupied. Some of them felt a gap between themselves and Sudhin who continued to live like a patrician of moderate means in a large airy flat in Russell Street off Park Street where he lived with his wife Rajeshwari, the well-known singer, ever since their marriage in 1943. Surrounded by books in English, Bengali, German and French, and a substantial collection of twentieth century Bengali paintings, he continued to lead his urbane life, mixing

equally with Hindus and Muslims, with Bengalis, with Indians from Bombay and Delhi and with European expatriates and visitors. Intellectuals from Europe and America always found their way to 6 Russell Street—Raymond Mortimer, Stephen Spender, Malcolm Muggeridge, Nicolas Nabokov, Edward Dimock, Chadbourne Gilpatric inevitably became the beneficiaries of his hospitality. There they might meet Buddhadev Bose, Samar Sen, Sushil Dey, Abani Chatterjee or M. N. Roy. Young Bengali poets frequently came in to seek his counsel and encouragement. Nonetheless, the world was no longer what it had been.

The external world continued to press its necessities. In 1949 Sudhin left his post at *The Statesman* and became chief public information officer of the Damodar Valley Corporation, which was to have been an Indian T.V.A. He remained there until 1954. The work apparently did not engage him greatly. He went to Europe in 1952 for an extended stay, and then at the end of his service with the Damodar Valley Corporation, he went abroad again, for much of 1955, returning early in 1956. He took up an appointment as a director of a survey and market research organization, the Indian Institute of Public Opinion, which had been founded by his old friend, Eric da Costa. His heart was not much in this work either. He was not a statistician and he did not enjoy supervising the work of part-time interviewers. The situation was quite otherwise with his part-time lectureship in comparative literature at Jadavpur. This experience was very precious to him. He had, in the past, always been remote from academic life; his intimate contacts with the academic world were confined mainly to those teachers who were also distinguished literary men, like his much-esteemed friend of many years' standing, Mr. Bishnu Dey, or who were connoisseurs of art and literature, like Professor S. N. Bose, the eminent physicist, and the late Dhurjatiprasad Mukherji (Mukhopadhyaya) or the late Humphrey House[2], all of whose cultivation and wit drew them to him.

Jadavpur pleased him; not only did it force him once more

[2] Humphrey House's *The Dickens World* was dedicated to Sudhin Datta.

into an intensive course of reading: it also brought him into contact with a new generation of sophisticated young men who combined, as he himself had done in earlier decades, scholarship and literary creation. The complexities of the latter-day theory of literature intrigued and challenged him. The young men treated him with the deference which is accorded only to classical figures, and at the same time his delight in discussion, his chivalrous conduct towards the proponents of opposing views, his disarming modesty and his often merry sallies, called forth from those who respected him as one who stood in the highest range of the Bengali literary pantheon an affection usually reserved only for coevals.

A friend has written that Sudhin was 'too generous with his time. . . he wasted hours which might have been spent to better purpose—in writing for instance.' He was generous with his money, generous with his time and with his company. Above all, he was generous in his judgement. He bore no grudges against anyone; he seldom spoke out against anyone. He would never say behind a person's back what he would not say to that person. He knew that he was criticized for his lack of political 'engagement' and for his 'western style of life'; he did not criticize those who did so. He had the rare gift of wit without malice, and he took no pleasure in the misfortune of others. He respected privacy and he did not gossip. His beloved friend, the fastidious, delicate, philosopher and critic, Professor Abu Sayeed Ayyub called him 'an outward prince and inward anchorite'.

The feature which impressed me as much as anything about him was his reserve. Behind the warm-hearted teasing affection, the worldly understanding, the grace of voice and gesture, the humanely sympathetic mien, I sensed a dark, velvet-like sadness, a grim conviction of the unrealizability of hopes, of the transience of love and happiness, of the burdensome costliness of truth. The antithetical constructions which were the mark of his style were not just literary conceits. Nor was his self-mockery an evasion of the responsibility for hard work or for the devotion to his calling as a man of letters. They were ex-

pressions from the depths of his spirit, of a mind deeply imprinted by the reality of an existence uncongenial to man's designs and aspirations. But by the discipline of a strong intellect and a richly responsive sensibility and by his cultivated tact and his refined taste, he formed from despair a life which was a work of art.

EDWARD SHILS

Part One

The World of Twilight

Early Chapters from an Unfinished Autobiography

When I look back on my own past, I can only see up to a patch of pillar-box red, surrounded by indefinite greens, with streaks of muted ochre; and yet so tenuous is the dividing line between memory and hearsay that I hesitate to call this complex of tints my earliest recollection. For it was my mother who put me into the picture by explaining that its vivid centre corresponded to a fluffy coat I had received from my father before my parents took me to Darjeeling, the Himalayan resort of leafy trees and precipitous swards, of tintop houses and spurious aborigines, of blazing flowers and muffling mists—all somehow redeemed in the end by the towering proximity of the unconcerned Kanchenjunga; and such impressions must obviously belong to my second and subsequent visits to the cathartic mountains. Of the first occasion, I seem to remember nothing except colours; and even now the daubs refuse to fall into an intelligible pattern. But if, in spite of my mother's repeated efforts, I cannot regard myself as the focal point of a landscape which remains incomplete without the significant figure of my father, I am ever aware of its affective undertone; and I tend in consequence to believe that the ambiguous prelude is an authentic symbol of my confused life.

To my mother, of course, the scene was neither indistinct nor suggestive of Freudian mysteries; and she described it as a common incident in the history of a pampered child who would not stop crying until, to the embarrassing amusement of the neighbours, his stumbling father had taken over the heavy family rickshaw from the four regular coolies. But no matter how detailed her narrative about my past, my mother's words only succeeded in evoking a grey fog that obliterated even the colours I had been seeing; and somewhere in the obscurity a

voice very like my father's kept calling for help. My mother made nothing of this image or its lack; instead, she pointed out that when later during the same holiday my father had badly twisted his ankle in the garden path, needing to be aided to the house, the accident had occurred late in the evening while mercifully I slept too soundly to add to the commotion; and the more I argued, the firmer grew her conviction that no reversal of the sequence of events, so frequent in a reminiscent mood, was in question here. For my mother considered herself a subtle psychologist only because she saw through most forms of malingering; and since her conscious world lacked all knowledge of cathartic motivation, she invariably closed such conversations by enquiring with devastating impatience if a man as effective and wise as my father would conceivably expect anything from a son of my poor calibre.

Before she reached the ripeness of old age, my mother was an adept in extracting a moral from the most unlikely tale; and the foregoing is only a minor illustration of her forensic technique that talked through every situation to the conclusion she momentarily held. Even so, she never quite succeeded in equating the voice I could hear with my own conscience; and she appeared to be perversely feminine when she disclaimed responsibility for spoiling me. For ten long years intervened between my sister, my parents' first born, and me, their second child; and towards the end of this period their yearning for a son acquired such intensity and urgency that, as my mother used to recount with a wry smile, she swallowed on the advice of a wise old woman a whole banana with an enormous piece of cobweb in it. This specific against barrenness, in additon to bringing about my immediate arrival, provided me with six more brothers and sisters; and yet, since my mother's next baby came three years after my birth, she had plenty of time to indulge me to the top of my bent. On the other hand, her third confinement occurred soon after we returned from Darjeeling; and by then I might already have forfeited a part of her attention.

An unimportant novelist proposed to divide married women into two categories by separating their opposite from those who

carve their children up to feed the husband; and were the distinction at all valid, my mother would belong to the first class. In any case, time made her less and less involved in our emotional lives; and while undoubtedly the size of her progeny contributed to the detachment, it should not be considered entirely involuntary or accidental, for the simple reason that my remaining brothers and sisters continued to be born over the next thirteen years. Moreover, my mother appeared to know at least instinctively that she could not escape paying the price of her choice; and if in consequence she seldom claimed our feelings, the great good we derived from this ultimately was at the outset lost in a sense of baffling desolation. Or such seemed my special case; and not only did the recurrent nightmare of my early childhood start somewhere here, but on the one occasion when, as a young man, I spoke to a psycho-analyst about myself, my memory refused to give up that infantile dream. It showed me floating in an oval pond, my neck caught within a square yoke, sprouting an infinity of disgusting greenery; and though the horizons looked bare, the slimy waters reflected a pair of white hills.

A great many years passed before the nightmare reappeared unbidden to my waking mind; and if by then it had become a poetical image without any trace of physical horror, its outlines were still so obsessively sharp that I found no difficulty in understanding why, every time it returned, it used to fill me with an anguish that kept me from sleeping for nights afterwards. Yet I never succeeded in bringing myself to speak of this to my mother; and I suspect that, while my childish fear of darkness arose out of the resulting repression, my early love of mountains was its sublimated form. My mother, of course, had no use for such dubious analysis; like her contemporaries, she believed that character could not be formed except by forcing one to do what one wanted to avoid; and because my father's views on education seemed heretical by current standards, she not only blamed him for my incipient vices but also gave me an extra slap or two in punishment for his criminal obstinacy. No wonder, therefore, that my first recollections and dreams remain

unpopulated; and though I see myself clearly building a mud castle in Central India, where my parents were spending another holiday just two years later, the picture continues to lack moment, in spite of portraying my father, mother, sister, brother, and a cousin, gathered together in an oil-lit room in the outskirts of Jubbalpore.

II

That vacation is nevertheless graven in my mind, because I received then my first parcel post addressed to me by name; and the package contained a knee-length tunic of scarlet silk, white Jodhpurs of thick satin, a turban of the brightest gold, and a sash to match the latter. These were presents for my birthday, which falls in the autumn, the season of holidays in Bengal; and they came from an uncle of my mother's. I danced with joy; and almost immediately nemesis in the shape of a nail from the magic box itself pierced my instep right through. As could be foreseen, this earned me several hard slaps from my mother, who thus reinforced her renewed warnings against excess; and my protesting father had to charm away my pain by promising a boat trip to the Marble Rocks, where the Narbada, when swollen with rain, turns into a frothy whirlpool. Yet she went wrong in considering her husband an over-indulgent parent; and while he remained ready enough to give what protection he could against his wife's quick temper, he seldom allowed people or passion to interfere with his sense of justice. He really believed that the chain of cause and effect is unbreakable; and he was surprised by the common refusal to face the consequences of one's actions.

For all that, he had much compassion; and if the years mellowed my mother into a woman uncritically kind to those she liked, my father's understanding grew until, towards the end of his life when I faced intolerable problems with which I did not want to burden him, I would sit beside him for an hour or two, chatting about literature or the topic of the day, and come

away feeling that somehow he had shared my unspoken distress. That is not to say that he and I saw eye to eye at any time. On the contrary, I had so seriously quarrelled with him in my early twenties that for a period we hardly talked to each other. And yet even then, though I hated him at times, I imagined that he knew more of what I wanted to be than did the recipients of my confidence, that while his good sense and worldly success compelled him to disapprove of my contempt for financial security and bourgeois conformism, his secret soul applauded my rebellious resolution, and that by humiliating me occasionally with taunts as to my earning capacity, he was only daring me to remain true to my nature and choice. In any case, his faith in my talents never wavered; and I suspect that he let me have almost unlimited scope, because he hoped to see me realize the possibilities he had ruthlessly repressed within himself.

Second in the order of his birth, he had been only seventeen when my grandfather died, leaving behind two married sons, two minors, a grandson, and a widow so saintly in her unpossessiveness that hangers-on doted on her, while dependents tore their hair in despair; and though their circumstance was comfortable for the time being, the eldest brother alone possessed a handsome income in consequence of inheriting his father's lucrative position as guarantor in a mercantile firm of Anglo-Greek origin. But he soon began to squander his substance on costly pleasures; and if this accorded with the current tradition of upper-class Bengalis, the rest of the household lacked the safety the Hindu joint family used once to provide by ensuring the interests of orphans and securing the board and lodging of wasters. For a disagreement with the head of the clan had made my grandfather leave the ancestral mansion without claiming his share of the common property, and the cause of the quarrel had concerned my father's impending marriage. Owing to his personal earnings, my grandfather had been the richest member of the enormous establishment; and yet, when he had begged to be given an extra bedroom, the usual allotment of two per branch having become insufficient by the earlier marriage of his eldest son, he had received a flat refusal, rendered

harsher by the reminder that, in spite of his private wealth, he was not, thank God, the sole owner of the premises.

The feud took place in 1883 or 1884; and by the time of my birth in 1901 we were at least on visiting terms with our relations, so that once a year, usually on the third day of the festival of Durga, I had to accompany my elders to the home of their ancestors. Among the worst trials of my childhood, the calls coincided with the beheading of the sacrificial goat; and gazing with petrifying horror at the quivering of the severed body, I used to say to myself that my father and uncles did well to get out of the hostile building with its hundred rooms, seven courtyards, two acres of private orchards and ponds, and countless inhabitants who, from furtive cubbyholes where their kind seemed to increase from year to year, crowded into the great hall of fly-blown mirrors and sheeted chandeliers. They sounded raucous, looked arrogant, exulted in the rules of caste, and the shabbier their clothes grew, the more they protested their ancient lineage to the detriment of the wealthy upstarts befouling the locality. The house no longer stands; and the most illustrious of its former denizens died last year at the age of ninety-one. Erect and mobile to the last, he was an endearing as well as a heartening example of family pride; and now that he is gone, the termite alone will prize the two-century-old parchment whereby the Honourable East India Company established the Dattas in central Calcutta when Fort William, the first stronghold of the new Empire, encroached on their original habitat beside the Hooghly.

An impossible prig in my callow youth, I did not feel even a morbid curiosity in our family history while those in possession of the facts were still alive; and now nobody can tell me how a clan as pretentious as mine could have emigrated from the least important of the three fishing villages which coalesced into Calcutta towards the middle of the eighteenth century. For, unlike us, most people of rank in the town had belonged originally to older parts of Bengal; and whereas our properties remained confined to the city, they supported their aristocratic claim by pointing to their distant estates. The majority of these

had, of course, fallen to hucksters at the forced sales in the formative years of British rule; and my relations never failed to cite every one of such transactions when they needed to establish their title to blue blood. But be it said in their favour that the neighbourhood where they had come to live contained also some of the wealthiest houses; and of those palaces few survived our ancestral mansion. Today little shops line the depressing street; and though a later generation of rich outsiders have built enormous edifices on the larger sites, the area looks dim and desolate. Perhaps it lacked charm at all times; and degenerated into tenements, the great buildings continue to exhibit all too openly the meanness once implicit in them.

III

If, indeed, the persistent legend that my grandfather was supremely gentle, humble, and generous be true, I cannot imagine how to derive him from his background; and perhaps unknowingly my father so resented the unfair treatment his parent had received on his account that he set before himself aims and ambitions not only diametrically opposed to those of the clan, but also such as would prove that he deserved the sacrifice made for his sake. It is, of course, absurd to believe that, because his kinsmen were dogmatic and latitudinarian, superstitious and irreverent, ignorant and idle, my father became a liberal humanist and a practising puritan, unvacillating in his personal faith, and yet an upholder of religious toleration, a great scholar, and an eminent man of affairs; and even in boyhood his love of learning had demonstrated his difference from contemporaries, who tended to think that higher education accorded ill with high birth and inherited wealth. But academic distinction had been natural to him; he had gone from examination to examination scoring record marks to stand first in each; and that he still did not choose the life of study might, I suspect, prove that, whatever his conscious reservations, he too had at

the crucial hour elected the values dear to his intellectual and moral inferiors.

I must not encourage the impression that my father's choice has been anything except fortunate for me; and not only is the complacency of my implied judgment a material consequence of his decision, but he could also retort that, whereas my character would have been tougher otherwise, he had no option at all. For, far from being an heir to a comfortable estate, he had to train himself against the extravagant habits of his eldest brother, while the one next to him had begun to show irresponsible disregard for respectability; and if by reaction he came to acknowledge the worth of money, its pursuit was not the exclusive preoccupation of his life, which always rejoiced in the harvest of fairer fields. As to his ostensible livelihood, he selected law as the one profession then open to a man of independent spirit; and even so, he had resolved to remain a solicitor because an advocate, though better-paid, could be tempted into servility by the offer of a judgeship. Nor had he rested content with such negative contribution to the cause of nascent nationalism; he was the architect of the Bengali Academy of Letters and the organizer of the National Council of Education; and his open association with the seditious leaders of agitational politics constantly endangered his liberty and our peace of mind from, say, 1905 to 1920.

He himself knew no fear at any time; and it is on record that when, during a political conference he had been attending at Natore, the great earthquake of 1901 reduced the town to a cumulative ruin, he could not be persuaded to leave his first-floor room even after the initial shock or two had thrown its walls out of alignment. Inscrutably enough, some of those who rushed out into the open fell into a crevice which, appearing under their feet the moment they left the tottering building, came together instantly to crush them to death; and my father recounted this story not to demonstrate his courage nor to advertise his luck, but simply to emphasize the need for keeping our trust in God. He hated physical pain; and yet he allowed a drunken surgeon to reset a fracture without anaesthetic, never

once crying out while the badly set shoulder-blade was being broken anew. I conclude therefore that he could have borne adversity if he had a mind to do so; and that he chose otherwise may afford a clearer proof of spiritual pride than of submission to God's will. At any rate, he recognized his own merit; and seeking a measure that would convince the world of his claim to its instant attention, he preferred action to contemplation. Hence, his meticulous conduct in everything he undertook; and genuinely indifferent to rewards, as he was always undaunted by mortality, he failed to become the philosopher he wanted to be because, unlike Socrates, he never pursued death and dying.

Those who will not die tomorrow feel no call to eat, drink, and be merry; and when my father insisted that even beasts possess immortal souls, he merely stressed the holiness of all life and did not propose to feed on the carcass of animals, aquaceous, terrestrial, and airborne. He looked on his own body as a vehicle of the ubiquitous spirit; and if therefore he desired physical health, utmost moderation was the keynote of his two simple meals, while he never touched intoxicants or narcotics, because corporeal stimulation or stupefaction would have been an insult to the pure essence. He also avoided sartorial elegance for the same reason; and though he refused to wear anything except spotless clothes, he dressed at all times in the ordinary manner of every other middle-class Bengali. Awake before six, he read the newspapers for half an hour, and then went to the neighbouring square for a constitutional lasting perhaps forty-five minutes, whether it rained or was blisteringly hot; and no sooner back than he plunged into his intellectual preoccupation of the moment, stopping at ten to get ready for his work in the courts, which opened at eleven. Often he stayed in his office until seven in the evening, and on returning home resumed his non-professional studies. At half-past ten he dined, and by eleven he had retired, not so much to sleep as to ponder and meditate. The pressure increased on Saturdays and Sundays, politics just within the law, and theosophy with sky as its limit taking up the afternoons and evenings; and educational or

cultural activities brought constant visitors who disrupted the daily routine.

The spontaneous simplicity of his attire, the spartan frugality of his habits, his undemonstrative geniality and ease in all kinds of company, derived from his infinite self-respect; and I tend to see him as he was in his late thirties and early forties—tall, straight, neither thin nor plump, of a teak-brown complexion, his wide forehead unencumbered by excess of hair, his narrow eyes hooded and dark, their penetration enhanced by old-fashioned glasses framed in gold, his disciplined moustache revealing the suspicion of a smile, slow and a shade awkward in his movements, and possessing a low voice that inspired confidence even when it rose in enchanting eloquence. For, though never a real orator, he was a renowned speaker, delighting in cogency and excellence of phrasing; and both qualities, with a fair measure of prolixity and apt quotations, had already established him as a notable writer and an acute thinker. I like to believe that he retained his characteristics to the last days of his life, which came perhaps thirty-five years later; and if, in the meantime, Mahatma Gandhi's entry into the political scene induced his withdrawal therefrom, his amazing erudition continued to grow until the very end, while his love of literature never abandoned him.

IV

His proficiency in the English tongue seemed prodigious, even in those days when educated Indians aspired to dream in that language; and though several among his generation could speak and write it equally well, the best of professional teachers only rivalled his knowledge of British authors, whereas his understanding amounted almost to empathy. Besides, English was not the only language he possessed; he had also mastered Sanskrit; and thus his long essay on Kalidasa and Shakespeare, published shortly after he had left the university, might count as the first attempt at comparative criticism in Bengali. True,

he never again concerned himself with a purely literary subject; and the unprinted verses he had secretly composed in his youth looked no better than the metrical translation of the *Cloud Messenger* he unwisely brought out in his later days. But reading Shakespeare with him is an unforgettable experience of my adolescence; and interpreted by him, the *Ancient Mariner* became for me, at the age of twelve, the veritable essence of Poetry. Naturally enough, his response to the post-Victorians felt cold compared to mine; and he laughed at Shaw rather than with him. Yet he pointed out to me years and years ago that Ibsen should not figure among the real rebels; and he considered *The Ghosts* or *The Wild Duck* classical plays, because their plots derived from a tragedy that had occurred long before the curtain rose on Destiny's instruments.

He himself preferred the Romantic drama where man is the master of his fate; and as he had made up his mind that the Hindu way of life was the best, he might have even considered it a blasphemy to attach cosmic significance to personal tragedy which obviously resulted from poor judgment. This, however, must not be confused with the doctrine of free will in the Christian sense; nor would he allow any equation between the Law of Karma and Original Sin. He felt unfettered, because there and then he identified himself with the Universal Spirit; and the pride he derived from his faith is what he missed in the monotheism of the Brahmo Samaj and what he wanted to instill into his countrymen. His unmistakable difference from Ram Mohun Roy lay here; and while, unlike the former, he found the miraculous parts of the gospels perfectly acceptable, he was so convinced of the inferiority inherent in the Judaeo-Roman ethics of the West that he could not consent to the British rule. Hence the fervour of his nationalism, condoning, if not actually contriving, acts of symbolic violence; and hence also his later scorn for the alien humility of Gandhi, with its esoteric repentance and exoteric compromise, its absolving confessions and coercive fasts, and finally its parading of the loin-cloth and assumption of meekness as the only passports to the kingdom of heaven.

Unfortunately, metaphysics and physics can maintain their absolute distinction only in a schizophrenic; and since my father undoubtedly knew how much he and his motherland owed to the West, he wasted much intellectual effort in trying to establish that everything of importance in European thought had been anticipated in Asia, the rest being ruinous irrelevancy. I imagine that his Theosophy expressed this unrealistic creed; and if history insists on the great value of the contribution made by Annie Besant and her disciples to the cause of Indian education, social reform, and political emancipation, my father must have become the most devout of her followers, initially, because she, an occidental, was the living example of his own trust in the wisdom of his country. For he felt happiest when he had found some tangible support for his will to believe; and usually unsatisfactory, the pragmatic test proved a near disaster at least once. A charlatan who claimed to be like the mythical ancients demonstrated his occult powers by walking on fire; and as he agreed, after his handsome remuneration had been doubled, to make my father repeat his performance, the latter followed the blazing trail to bed, nursing his secondary burns for six weeks.

Needless to add, his credulity or lack of scepticism assumed generally a less extreme form; and he was so little of an anglophobe that, even after the massacre of Jalianwala Bagh, he insisted on my remembering that, as the first to introduce the rule of law into India, the British had condemned themselves by their own standards, not ours. Nevertheless, two generations separated my father from, say, Michael Madhusudan Datta who, not content with being the greatest poet Bengal had produced until then, decided at the height of his poetical genius to begin life anew as a barrister, because he could find no other way of mitigating the inferiority his foreign masters inspired in him; and since he too had known better than to write his poetry in English, my father's uncompromising rejection of exotic affectations is as understandable as his abiding conviction that Bengalis will never realize their creative potentiality in full except through the medium of their mother tongue. He tended

consequently to exaggerate the merits of our old literature; and not only was he slow to recognize the stature of Tagore, whose inspiration seemed patently Western, but he also overpraised boring poetasters like Nabin Chandra Sen, for the simple reason that both in theme and treatment they belonged to the native tradition.

Nor did he always escape the pitfall which few Indian writers on Hindu philosophy avoid; and I failed to persuade him that if indeed our ancient thinkers had no more to their credit than suggesting Bradley's views, for instance, then it must surely count as a pity to waste twelve years—so the pedagogies of yore prescribed—on learning Sanskrit grammar in order to guess at their meaning. My argument, however, followed from his own when he warned me that I was proving a poor Hegelian in contending that, for Sankara, Nothing stood prior to Being; and in any case, he well understood and readily acknowledged how much his political outlook owed to Edmund Burke and John Stuart Mill. Though synthesis attracted him irresistibly, he possessed at the same time a great gift for analysis; and he had too high a regard for facts to deny that, quite apart from science and technology, many other benefits of European civilization had seeped into Indian culture, enriching its content, during the preceding fifty years. These he recognized to be intrinsically good; and so anxious was he to keep open the possibilities of our further improvement from that unexhausted source that in 1921 he made Tagore join him in open opposition to Gandhi's anti-intellectual denunciations of 'Western' education.

V

There, in that manifold of countervailing forces, may reside the reason for the paucity of his political writings; and only once did he show positive unbalance when contrasting the cultures of Europe and India. This happened in the one course of lectures he delivered at the University of Calcutta; and perhaps because then he was well past seventy, he thought that it sufficed

to quote copiously from Lord Derby's translation of the Iliad to prove that the lecherous gods of Greece had no conception of justice, whereas at least by implication the Hindu, linked to the universe of eternal cause and effect, possessed always the secret of right behaviour. Of course, even on other occasions he eschewed what he called the casuistry of modern philosophers; and so I considered him a theologian, irrefutable if his premises were conceded, but begging the question where fundamentals demanded scrutiny. At all events, he had never any use for the dialectic dispute; and at his best, as for instance in his book on the monism of the Upanishads, he presented the essential unity of great minds with real mastery.

Equally exemplary for its learning and penetration was his subsequent refutation of the nihilism attributed to Buddha by Western scholars; and since both works appeared serially in a periodical I founded in 1932, I am impelled to remember that some of the reviews he did for the magazine reached a standard rare in contemporary journalism. The finest, perhaps, was the criticism of Yeats' translation of the Upanishads; and there, no less than elsewhere, his very generosity effected the utmost devastation. Alas, as age cut down his external activities, he spent more and more time in writing; and then not only did he sacrifice quality to quantity, but probably because he subconsciously realized that the Gandhian epoch had brushed aside everything he stood for, he might also have felt the need to assert his faith without examining its bearing on current events and gathering uncertainties. Moreover, his veneration for Mrs Besant had made him resentful of the political exile in which she had been forced to pass her last years; and conceivably, therefore, he interlarded his own thoughts and researches with lengthy extracts from the hermetic literature of theosophy to announce that whoever possessed the future, India's past remained in the safe-keeping of Madame Blavatsky's apostolic successors.

On the other hand, it is quite likely that I have, in the manner of amateur analysts, imagined a latent urge where none existed; and my father's case requires especially cautious treatment,

because he was profound and not complex. Of course, his published volumes number twenty-two; and while some are longer than six hundred pages, he composed most of them between the ages of sixty and seventy-five. Yet want of clarity is not among the inevitable defects of his hasty writings; on the contrary, he frequently laboured the obvious; and if, even so, he seldom achieved precision, the fault lay more in the subject matter than in the style. For, from his very first work—one of his only two English books, the other being the Kamala lectures I have already referred to—he concerned himself with the nature of the Universal Mind; and the scope of his inquiry might be suggested by translating the names of a few of his Bengali treatises into such titles as 'The Doctrine of Theism in the Gita', 'The Absolute of the Upanishads', 'Yagnavalkya the Monist', and so on. According to his understanding, the ultimate reality is ineffable perfection in which everything, matched by its opposite, comes to eternal rest; and since the mystic's experience results either from self-transcending contemplation, or from self-denying love, exact words cannot be employed in the circumstances. The situation also discourages arguments, makes polemics degrading; and value resides in authority alone, particularly when its voice appears to echo perennially through the world.

The development of Mr Aldous Huxley has demonstrated that spiritual aspirations do not necessitate rejection of material civilization or acceptance of gross superstitions; and though his destructive side shocked my father almost invariably, they resemble each other in their evolutionary faith and love of learning. Mr Huxley, of course, so abhors sex that again and again he comes back to the topic with what looks like obsessive candour; and my father's life-long decorum stood him in poor stead when he wrote his fat book on Vaishnavism, called 'The Religion of Love'. But he too illustrated that unreason is not an unavoidable effect of the First Cause; and while he considered it impertinent as well as impracticable to reduce Providence to a syllogism, he felt completely certain even in the blackest days of 1942 that divine logic would not let Hitler win the war. For

fundamentally he was a Vedantist, irrevocably committed to the idea that the universe progresses from darkness to light by virtue of laws inherent in its being; and while he readily admitted that his comprehension was not extensive enough to take in the entire phase of a cosmic principle, precepts deduced therefrom had come to regulate his life, because to behave differently would have in the very least retarded the final triumph of good. Thus, long before Mr E. M. Forster counselled us to act like immortals without forgetting that tomorrow we die, my father had accepted the advice; and that may be why to the end of his days he remained a severe critic of everything evanescent, and yet not an embittered one.

But I anticipate; I am only at the beginning of my story; and during the period I wish to recall my father had no need to be on the defensive. He had already reached the top of his profession; his interests and influence were still expanding; and people from all corners of India recognized his integrity, applauded his scholarship, admired his ability, and commended his patriotism. Moderate leaders like Surendranath Banerjea and Gokhale, Motilal Nehru and Sapru, Srinivas Shastri and Sinha thought him perhaps a dangerous extremist to avoid from ideological consideration; yet they too knew that his courage remained unmotivated by any desire for cheap popularity, and as opposed to them, there were others, high and low, who loved him and thought he spoke only words of wisdom. Even so, his head had not been turned; he made himself more and more accessible to all and sundry; and, thus, no sooner do I succeed in seeing him against a background of leisure with unlimited opportunities for ministering to my primal needs than he splits up into a figure such as a vorticist might have invented to illustrate multi-dimensional motion. For until we came back from the vacation at Jubbalpore, I had been a sickly child unlikely to survive beyond his fifth year; and after our return the doctors seemed so uniformly reassuring that my father felt free to discharge other than family duties.

VI

Since the psychosomatic reaction to my estrangement from him some fifteen or twenty years later proved to be no less serious than my infantile illness, I must thank the disappearing system called the Hindu joint family for making my childhood, if not ecstatically happy, at least pleasantly monotonous; and when I look back on the succeeding years, I feel neither strain nor void, but only a gradual and gentle withdrawal, almost fully compensated for by the simultaneous emergence of my father's eldest brother as an indulgent uncle, ready to protect me from my mother's short temper, munificent in his gifts of toys, and a storyteller of extraordinary talent. He could not be taken for an educated man in the real sense of the word; and I have already recounted that having inherited at the age of twenty my grandfather's connexion with, and income from, one of the largest commercial houses in Calcutta, he had early acquired a consuming taste for the fast life with the usual quota of grasping mistresses, expensive horses, pedigreed dogs, opulent furniture, fine clothes, and a host of deferential friends. But he did not lack cultivation: an accomplished musician himself, he was a generous patron of Indian classical music; he had seen a good deal of his country; and his failing health brought about by his early excesses turned him into an indiscriminate reader, especially of English fiction.

What he read he could recall with astonishing vividness; and with it he would mix personal experience, no less sharply recollected, to improvise glorious stories which for hours on end enthralled his hearers, young and old, sophisticated and simple. As told by him, the tales sounded credible, though they generally abounded in picaresque and paranormal elements; and he made the familiar fabulous by an imaginative use of well known, if easily forgotten, details. Thus conversing once with people who had just returned from their annual visit to Darjeeling, he enchanted them by remarking that the place protruded so far into the skies that you had to keep your windows eternally shut against the invading clouds; and since to my definite know-

ledge he had never read the *Cloud Messenger* of Kalidasa, the image owed nothing to any figure of speech or literary cliché, but embodied an authentic description of the fractured mists peculiar to that hill station. It also mattered little whether the local population did or did not, in fact, smear their cheeks with pig's blood to protect themselves from the cold; the picture seemed observably true to their special ruddiness; and the atmosphere was at the same time prepared for their transformation into exotic savages without destroying the verisimilitude of the narrative.

Even when his inventive faculty deserted him temporarily, his verbal dexterity remained unimpaired; and, sometimes seeing me sit disconsolate while he read perhaps *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* or *The Arabian Nights,* he would orally translate the pages as he turned them over, in order to create for me a visible world of unmitigated mystery. Nor did his audience on such occasions consist only of me: his wife—a woman slightly soured by the ferment of his wild oats, but too worldly wise to forget that his peccadilloes exemplified the prerogatives of his class and standing, his age and tradition—his wife too would often grow wide-eyed with wonder like myself, listening to his original or second-hand tales; and the longer he spoke the larger became the number of magic casements he opened—some on the foam of perilous seas and others on equally forlorn moors of Northumbria or plateaux of ice-bound Thibet, where desperate men would advance towards their inexorable doom, measuring out the mounting suspense by their audible steps. For my uncle seemed surprisingly conventional for an old roué; and because his conception of the moral law admitted neither of exception nor of complexity, he uncomplainingly accepted the consequences of his shattered health, although he doubted if diabetes was the fit punishment for a sinner who had yet respected the tenets of his religion by avoiding alcohol with inflexible resolution.

Be that as it may, I had no cause for deploring his disease: it compelled him to avoid the strenuous life of the city even at a second remove; and especially during the hot weather he retired

to his garden house, taking me with him for lack of better company. The retreat was the mausoleum of his past orgies; and once there the physical contact with his vanished youth created in him at least an illusion of health. But I too found it paradise enow; and should I be accused of infantile escapism, I would not deny the charge, but add only that I still follow Landor in loving art next to nature. As for the actual villa, its pond, framed in banks of seagreen grass, reflected a sky of an intenser blue than Maeterlinck's bird could emulate a few years later; the glittering leaves of the jack fruit tree shone like burnished bronze on the outside, while the obverse merged into the colouring of the brown doe that sat ruminating in their shade; and the very rockery, in spite of its patent artificiality, possessed the patina of a Chinese hermitage. Rarely, a kingfisher dived into the lambent pool, causing lazy ripples to simulate a round of perfunctory activity; the woodpecker tapped the sago palm to the rhythm of the singing silence; and beside unwaxing heaps of weed, the gardeners dozed, squatting on the shaggy lawns, their ebony skin aglow.

The head gardener himself tended the rose bushes inside a large enclosure of clipped privet; and while the individual colouring of the prize flowers testified to the ageing man's grafting skill, the tonality of the whole derived from his inborn taste that would have enhanced the reputation of a minor Impressionist. But as yet I knew nothing of such a painter; and if I was equally unacquainted with Douanier Rousseau, my uncle's renderings of Rider Haggard had made me so partial to the African jungle that I sought to recapture its romance in the two hot houses where giant ferns and monstrous orchids flaunted their barbaric splendour in the aquamarine obscurity created by the thatch of reeds on the glass roof. Nor did the pseudo-Baroque building lack outlandish appeal: it contained a strange assortment of bric-a-brac ranging from life-size bronze stags to Dresden figurines of utmost fragility, from tremendous vases of Chinese porcelain to Indian ivories of exquisite workmanship; and quite a few items reminded their owner of escapes and escapades in the back of the beyond. Even the furniture showed

a collector's caprice; and though the outcome sacrificed harmony, it achieved counterpoint. Anyhow, the oil-burning lamps of crystal and Venetian glass and silver possessed true majesty; and the beauty of bygone days became visible in the opalescent radiance of their cones and globes and domes, each wearing a crown of perforated gun-metal.

VII

In the autumn the scene shifted to Benares where, although I was now vastly improved in health, I still needed to go every year for a change of air; and this having become also my uncle's routine, I would be packed off with him for my annual wintering amidst ripening lentil and flowering mustard. We did not return to town until the giant neems had renewed their foliage and the mango trees had blossommed; and in the interval tattooed women from the surrounding villages would come regularly to our bungalow, wearing knee-length saris of tangerine red and billowy blouses of canary homespun. Their bangles of oxydized silver reached almost to their elbows; and made of the same metal, their anklets touched their calves. Their high necks were encased in studded chokers which repeated the pattern of the other ornaments; they balanced on their heads wickerwork baskets larger than cartwheels and filled with Gargantuan aubergines of imperial purple, gourds of pale jade, pied pumpkins, coraline radishes, fern-like spinach, and enormous fish mailed in the manner of medieval knights; and others brought pulses—gold and pink, olive and brown, black and grey—, clarified butter curdled into tawny grains, and sharp-smelling oil, resinous as the noonday shade in a grove of pine.

My aunt spent the whole morning inspecting their ware and beating down their prices. But I soon tired of her bargaining, and wandered off to the terraced well where all day long a pair of white bullocks were driven up and down a long and steep ramp to draw a splashing cauldron of hammered iron over the

creaking pulley of worn wood. Or else the army pensioner we brought along with us from Calcutta to keep watch at night would don his Rajput turban and necklace of fabulous medals to accompany me on a leisurely walk through the quiet streets of the cantonment; and, while pointing to the decorations one by one, he told me of his campaigns in Chitral and Burma, and would not forget to make me give the military salute when perchance we met the British colonel, thus turning on himself patronizing appreciation delivered in atrocious Hindustani. The old havildar, to accord him his former rank, had however neither deference nor mercy for lesser fry; and once finding two drunken tommies in our grounds, he treated them with the highhandedness of an irate father, even if what he put into them on the occasion was not the fear of God but the dread of their superior officer whom he claimed as his friend.

The afternoon drives in rickety carriages drawn by diminutive ponies were much less fun, although the old warrior sat in his full regalia beside the puny driver; and whereas the temples seemed frighteningly crowded, and the bazaars tawdry with garish toys of lacquered wood, a boat trip down the lively ghats could have been considered worth-while if it did not exhaust my uncle to the point of rendering him ill-tempered for the rest of the evening. In the circumstances, what remains graven in my mind is a composite picture of all such visits; and the persistent nostalgia aroused in me by the residue may account for the feeling of homecoming I experience whenever I cross the western border of Bengal. All in all, therefore, the total emotion exceeds the sum of its parts; and 'irreducible' seems also the appropriate epithet for the recollected excitement of the numberless railway journeys we performed in those wandering years. Yet as doctors had told my uncle that his nervous debility would get worse unless he avoided fast trains, we travelled by the slowest passengers which often required twenty-four hours to cover three hundred miles, stopping at every station interminably; and this, instead of opening my eyes to the unique personality of each, taught me that, no matter where we halted, the pervasive hawkers cried in the same key, and

the forlorn females looked exactly alike in their variegated agitation.

Our exceptional season at Muttra is also hard to describe, because it resembled Benares in its tortuous and stone-paved lanes, its uninviting temples, and its gay ghats, although these were less extensive, as its river was narrower; and if, by reason of our rented house being closer to the centre of the town, street vendors took there the place of rustic pedlars, the life in the distant fields followed the self-same mode. Familiarly mellow, the winter sun shone from a similar angle to gild an equally blue sky; and whether I had reached the age of ten or hovered between six and seven made not the slightest difference to the everlasting plains of Northern India. For all that, I was growing up; a whole-time tutor had been attached to me on the eve of our departure for Muttra; and he so loved eating that one evening when we strolled through the bazaar, he found it impossible to resist the temptation offered by the sight of a creamy sweet thickening over a roaring fire. He had to buy a large quantity, but could not wait until we got home before tasting it; and while he savoured large mouthfuls, he trod on a sleeping dog whose bite he could not have avoided except by spilling the delicacy. He chose therefore the lesser evil; and instead of laughing at him, my uncle packed him off home in permanent disgrace.

My uncle's rage on the occasion, expressed in the harshest words without even a hint of sympathy, distressed me as much as his subsequent prostration; and sensing perhaps that he had made me vaguely critical, he took me along to near-by Agra for my first view of Taj Mahal. Seen, however, in the high noon, the wonder of the world blinded me to its merits; and not until many years had passed did I begin to realize that a great building may yet be ugly. My uncle had of course over-estimated his strength once again; and no sooner there than he retracted his promise to visit also the Fort and Fatehpur Sikri. But I felt no disappointment; my trust in his judgment had been shaken; and I consoled myself with the secret thought that he was given to exaggeration. Moreover, a few weeks later my father and

mother arrived to cheer everybody up; and the later visit I I paid with them to Delhi was the beginning of my particular orientation to the history of my country. For when my father evoked the past, ruins ceased to exist, becoming instead thronged palaces with courtiers, with scintillating brocades and curved scimitars, awaiting the arrival of the Great Moghul in watchful silence; and though we saw also the remains of the Durbar where a month earlier George the Fifth had been crowned, desolation possessed the site, because my father suggested that the graveyard of so many empires was no place for the new capital of British India.

VIII

My uncle loved travelling no less than I did; and so long as it lasted he forgot the strict regimen he had been prescribed, eating with enjoyment whatever the bearded attendants of the railway refreshment rooms placed before him, forgetting to rest at the appointed hour, and ready to devote all his attention to me. But the exertion and the excitement knocked him out completely; and he dreaded even more the strain to come. Thus immediately on reaching home, he took to bed from which, after a few days of virtual immobility, he would drag himself to the sitting-room chaise-longue only when he had visitors in the morning. These, generally, were simple men who, as often as not, worked in his own office; and though on his enforced retirement his place there had nominally been taken by his son, the latter had already become so besotted that the senior members of the Indian staff came regularly to their former head to repeat the previous day's gossip, cheering the invalid with their garrulity, and at the same time commiserating with him silently for the disappointment his heir had occasioned him. Their unspoken sympathy certainly testified to their good breeding, genuine loyalty, and kind disposition; and the affection they gave me came from their gentle hearts and not from any ulterior desire to flatter their patron by imitation. But my

uncle's bitterness about his son was unveiled and altogether divorced from the memory of his own past; and his love for me possessed a core of revenge that did not escape my astute aunt.

Apart from the half-sensed embarrassment this induced in me, I grew soon aware, and that in spite of the indirect approach to such topics whenever I happened to be present, that my uncle felt much greater disgust for his son's impropriety than for his immorality; and in later years what shocked me even more was that my cousin's mother and wife, while remaining noticeably unhappy, did not seem to mind either in any real way. It would be easy to ascribe their ethical and emotional indifference to the helpless position of women in Hindu society; and yet that would account for only a part of their attitude. For though the joint family worked solely because it had learnt to tolerate in its individual units the widest divergence from normal behaviour, my mother never took the least pain to hide her absolute condemnation of her nephew's conduct and her boundless contempt for the complaisance of her sister-in-law and niece; and as to my cousin himself, I can think of nothing in his favour except a modicum of native charm and a certain predilection for music. Otherwise he created an impression of utter grossness—both spiritual and physical: practically unlettered, though he spoke English to be able to keep his job, he never read even a newspaper; and through excessive eating and drinking he had become the fattest man in Calcutta, weighing over four hundred pounds at the age of forty.

He had been warned that if he continued to drink two bottles of whisky every evening, he would die an early death; and an addict persuaded him to take to opium as an alternative. Yet his craving for alcohol refused to be assuaged; and so he came to combine an ounce of the drug with two quarts of gin. This he consumed not at home, but in the houses he successively rented to keep some of the ugliest women in town; and there around six in the afternoon his ferret-faced cronies foregathered for what they considered a good time—evidently unconnected with sex which, after all, requires some degree of sobriety. The rounds ended about midnight when my cousin returned home

outwardly steady, although irritated beyond endurance by any show of light, and often too hot to wear much beside his underclothes; and following a dinner of incredible size and richness, he retired, rising next morning just in time to set off for his office at ten. Unfortunately holidays provided extra hours for experiments with the hallucination of depravity; and on one such occasion he did succeed in divesting himself altogether of common sense. For, at the hour of four, while the June sun showed not the least inclination to encourage shadows, he drove a charabanc down our own street; and he gave bystanders, including his father, little chance to admire his superb management of the two fiery horses, because he had packed the open carriage with half-clad Maenads in the last stages of inebriation.

He was sent for later in the night, and shouted at by my uncle whom my father for once made no attempt to restrain; and whereas the whole household trembled in terror, my cousin merely swayed a bit from time to time. Except for this he remained entirely unmoved throughout the never-ending interview; and though many years later I tried to think that his obstinate refusal to heed the criticism of his elders connoted courage, I am now far from certain that it was not animal inanition. At any rate his vices did not possess any trace of originality or psychological interest; and even if we should imagine that somewhere deep within his mountainous body there resided a sense of sin which he enjoyed titillating with forbidden drink, he kept women not because he obviously lacked female company at home, but from brazen imitation of what his class had been practising for several generations. For many considered it an obligation of wealth to behave like born idiots; and accordingly the scion of a great house, who boasted that he had spent Rs. 50,000 on the wedding of a cat belonging to his mistress, was reminded by his wife that her father-in-law had squandered double that amount on the marriage of a brainless monkey, otherwise known as her husband.

Brought up in old Calcutta families with traditions of similar debauchery, the likes of my aunt and her daughter-in-law could

hardly expect anything better from their husbands and sons; and conceivably they wanted the male of the species to go the way of his forebear to prove to themselves and the world that they were people of means and as licentious as their lineage demanded. This to my mind is at least a partial explanation of the attitude his mother and wife manifested towards my cousin; and perhaps the rest lies in the fact that, until hardly three decades ago, the feminine hierarchy in a Bengali household of any size almost never met its masculine counterpart outside of bed, where if the husband returned regularly before daybreak, the wife had no material ground of complaint. Moreover, keeping a woman was, after all, very different from having a love affair with someone of the same social standing as one's spouse; and the absolute segregation of the sexes rendered the second possibility infinitely remote. As for the ladies paying the gentlemen back in their own currency, the comparative immobility of the female was not the only deterrent: the matriarch, in addition to her thousand eyes, employed a myriad of spies to track down the slightest deviation from utmost respectability in her juniors; and even the latter, for some reason I have never fathomed, refused to subscribe to the principle that promotes honour among thieves.

IX

Their world was for all that less bleak than it sounds; and whereas the forenoon abounded in exacting chores connected with the heterogeneous requirements of a large and complex household, the afternoons provided all the leisure for a protracted toilette, while a gossiping hairdresser, turn by turn, oiled and combed the head of every housewife who sat on the terrace facing the square mirror of her personal dressing case. The itinerant coiffeuse knew the latest scandals not only of the neighbourhood but also of related families scattered over the expanding city; and what she retailed could be verified by direct questions or innuendoes after the priest had performed

the evening worship of the household deity to the accompaniment of lamps and bells, conches and gongs. The babel of female voices that generally followed this din offended me only a shade less than the perfunctory patting of the head I had to suffer each time a visitor arrived; and if the confabulation took place outside our house, immensely though I enjoyed the ride in the shuttered palanquin borne by the chanting bearers with our head doorkeeper in his coloured pugaree, gold-flecked beads, and brass-tipped bamboo puffing behind, I found the incomprehensible talk here, as at home, obscurely disturbing. For without being coarse, the conversations contained a predominantly sexual flavour; and I felt so alarmed by the atmosphere that I failed to register the raciness of the native idioms, which even then had almost disappeared from educated speech.

Fortunately I did not have to gaze with fascinated horror at the working of their betel-darkened mouths whenever I sought the company of my aunts or mother; and the latter drew me most on the days of private fasts and simple feasts when the marble floor of the family chapel was patterned into an austere arabesque with the washing of powdered rice, the juice of bean leaves, turmeric paste, black cummins, and vermilion dust. My mother would sit on a reed mat spread at the open door, wearing a sari of raw silk with a wide border of red; and far to her left the shrine's brocade and gold would reflect the light of the butter lamps, while the rich cream of the altar flowers would be set off by the base of magenta bushels decorated with cowrie shells. But soon my eyes would cease to take in these pictorial details; nor would I be impatient for the ceremony to end, in order that I could have my share of the offering of fruits and sweets heaped on silver platters. For my mother would begin to repeat the fable behind the ritual; and though, as a story teller, she compared poorly with my uncle, the memorized myth would be so strikingly worded and contain interludes of such pointed rhyme that I would have to listen to the well-known tale, say, of the unbelieving adventurer who went from shipwreck to shipwreck and bankruptcy to bankruptcy until

from sheer fatigue he had placated the fickle goddess of wealth by enduring devotion.

These observances often occupied the whole day; and because my mother was a stickler for rigid rules, she refused to touch food or water before sundown or later. Towards the late afternoon, her features would therefore begin to assume a spiritual look which appealed to me more than the slightly sensuous handsomeness of her everyday face with its well-proportioned nose, unwinking eyes, curly black hair, and full lips, hinting at even, if somewhat prominent, teeth; and though the voluntary deprivation did her temper little good, they made her plump figure noticeably slim by the time she had passed beyond the sympathetic magic of such propitiatory rites as I have just described to the imitation of Savitri. The legend of this pure and persistent princess who compelled the very god of death to return her husband's life possessed an assertive character that suited my mother's positive personality; and the three days' complete fast, repeated over a cycle of seven severe summers, conferred on her a moral authority she exploited in and out of season. Yet all sorts of people liked her genuinely; and perhaps their feeling testified to her magnificent vitality.

I hold that the aim of education should be to fit a person for facing unprecedented situations with equanimity; and in this test she surpassed most men of her generation and mine. Her English was, of course, rudimentary; and if, unlike her contemporaries, she possessed a deep insight into Bengali literature as well as sufficient Sanskrit to gather the gist of devotional writings in that language, she knew no more Hindi than ordering our non-Bengali servants required. But when, after spending nearly two-thirds of her life in seclusion, she started to go about the open world, she spoke for half an hour in her broken Hindi, interspersed with a few English words and a great many Sanskrit ones, to a cheering audience in the strange and distant city of Madras where the theosophists of the world were meeting for their annual convention; and though right to the end her personal habits remained strictly customary, she never failed to charm my foreign friends by the vivacity of her special

Esperanto. For without being prying, her curiosity extended to everyone and everything; and so great was her zest for life that, past seventy-five and in failing health, she could hardly be prevented from undertaking, all alone, the longest of railway journeys under gruelling conditions.

Her spirit of independence reached its zenith at the great climacteric when she developed a psychopathic grievance against my father of such intensity as to compel their virtual separation for months at a time; and while this brought her nearer to her children, the fierce core of her character could, as I have already indicated, be softened only by advancing years. But if in late youth and early middle age her moralizing religiosity was frequently quite obnoxious, her capacity for enjoyment brooked no restraint; and she seemed the more endearing because, being, for example, the strictest of vegetarians, she had to seek vicarious satisfaction for her love of food. This made her a good hostess; and people spoke with respect of our dinners at which she never sat down. For she liked company; and, as on formal occasions it would have been unseemly to show herself to the guests, she preferred small gatherings of intimates where punctuality in the service of meals mattered less than their excellence and variety, enriched by a hospitality both spontaneous and patent. On the other hand, she was easily entertained; the least proof of real consideration broke her defences down; and the persons she favoured could usually count on her suspending ethical judgment, even though their general conduct departed from the norm outrageously.

X

At all events, for my younger uncle Amar she felt an indulgent affection that her own brother or children never appeared to receive; and yet it was this third son of my grandfather who, according to my eldest uncle Dhiren, the head of the family, had blotted its non-existent escutcheon indelibly. For uncle Amar had forgotten his respectable antecedents so far as to

become a professional actor; and, much more inexcusably, he had upset every calculation based on the moral law by making a spectacular success of his degraded career. Of course, he had been thrown out of the household; and not only did his patrimony disappear in no time, but in his determination to make the playhouse he owned the best in Calcutta, he spared no expense on its equipment and upkeep. Thus, colossal though his earnings always were, he spent more and more from year to year; and now, with his popularity at its amazing height and his income increasing all the time, his exploits served no other purpose except to keep his creditors from throwing him into gaol. Nevertheless his flamboyance remained as exuberant as ever; and he had proved once and for all that Giris Chandra Ghose, the acknowledged father of the modern Bengali stage, held no monopoly of the theatre, even writing his own pieces when, in a desperate attempt to halt his successful competition, he had been denied permission to perform the latter's works.

Uncle Dhiren found in such triumphs further evidence of his third brother's degeneracy; and oblivious of my presence, he would point out to the more intimate of the morning visitors that uncle Amar lacked even the elementary decency of pretending to respect Giris Ghose who after all was his Guru, though he only learnt from the Master how to keep in step with the worst streetwalkers; and he would add in seeming justification of his harsh attitude that, far from despising the dramatic art, he himself had in his youth lent his patronage and musical gifts to the operatic company of local amateurs. But that must have been some thirty years before the reported conversation; and since then the exotic appeal of the professional stage, modelled on the current European theatre, had grown irresistible, because, as he pretended to believe, females of easy virtue now took the part formerly filled by boys of good families. None except the densest listener could therefore resist the unspoken conclusion that uncle Amar too prostituted himself; and the least that his God-fearing relations could do was to consider him a leper especially contaminating for the young and the innocent, to both of which categories I unfortunately belonged.

Once again, much less opprobrium appeared to attach to uncle Amar's uninhibited affairs with the leading actresses of the day than to his need for strong drinks, although the former humiliated his wife patently, whereas the latter not only figured among the common failings of actors but in my uncle's case produced not the least outward effect, however frequent and copious the dose. But if it seemed perverse to hold that his good head somehow enhanced the sin, his death at the age of forty-one left no doubt as to its direct relation with his infinite capacity; and already, perhaps ten years before the end, he had so strained his constitution that his doctors sent him off on a lengthy recuperation to the remotest of watering places. By the time he came back apparently restored, my parents had received enough warning about the real state of his health to make it easy for my mother to persuade the family that the prodigal must be induced to return home; and when his wife passed away shortly thereafter—not from a broken heart but from a ruined digestion—my mother assumed the responsibility of looking after him. He possessed too open a nature to hide the gratitude he felt; and she responded by recognizing that he was a rebel and not a debased wastrel.

Everything abnormal has always impressed the Hindu mind, even physical deformity being on occasion considered good evidence of divine grace, as for example in the case of a heifer with an extra limb which earns its owner regular alms; and uncle Amar was not only lovably unconventional but at the same time so obviously a man of genius that my father with his native reverence for the creative spirit could have had no private doubt that to judge his next brother required standards other than those applicable to ordinary people. Thus the contemplated insulation of the younger generation against uncle Amar failed to be carried out; and though this did not mean that the general rule forbidding my visit to any public theatre fell into disuse until I had left my adolescence far behind me, yet the day came when my mother of all people insisted that my education would remain incomplete unless I saw my uncle perform at least once. The occasion coincided with one of the

most memorable moments of his public life; and if, lacking a first-hand knowledge of his contemporaries, I hesitate to echo his admirers who maintained that he surpassed all rivals, I cannot, even so, admit that only my inexperience and the romance I had invested him with formed my persisting belief that he was a great actor.

His enemies ascribed his unquestionable popularity to his gift for publicity rather than to his talent for acting; and to illustrate how he loved to rant, stories were invented of his putting into extempore blank verse this or that simple sentence, originally in prose. But, at least on the evening I witnessed his theatrecraft, his critics could hardly deny that his superb courage bore no resemblance to mere bravado; and it remains the only instance of a single play being performed successively on the same night in two such dissimilar languages as English and Bengali, making possible a visual comparison of real validity. For a famous company of British players had almost concluded a season of unparallelled success in Calcutta; and the most acclaimed item in their repertory happened to be a dramatization of 'Quo Vadis' which had earned Sienkiwicz the Nobel Prize a few months earlier. Having translated the piece in record time, uncle Amar invited the foreigners to present their version on his stage; and by previous agreement his rendering followed theirs. Oh, with what relief I saw that long before the final curtain the audience had forgotten the visitors; and I learnt later that the triumph, exhibiting every sign of restraint and taste, bordered on the miraculous, because there had been no opportunity for adequate rehearsals.

XI

Bengalis are by and large natural actors; and uncle Amar was in addition endowed with a fine presence, a handsome face, and a complexion of ripe corn which his hair and moustache of lustrous black emphasized to a remarkable extent. But his open eyes, expressive gestures, and glorious voice had acquired their

capacity for manifesting the slightest modulations of feeling through years of self-discipline; and if his specifically Hindu background and mental make-up rendered his performance as the Christian hero of 'Quo Vadis' especially creditable, he refused to be a fatalist, left nothing to chance, and demonstrated by his constant industry that good luck and good management are synonymous. The attention he devoted to publicity showed this meticulous regard for details; and since the theatre constituted his life, he ensured its success through advertisements that would have excited the admiration of even American experts in that art. His dramatic writings were no less purposive; and after he had dictated the next week's playbills, he would return to dictating the play in current composition so that the billboards might have new titles to display in the coming months. For custom in those days compelled the Bengali stage to put on all-night shows five times a week; and while each occasion demanded several pieces, indefinite repetition of the same programme hurt the producer's self-respect.

Whether or not they are looked upon as profanation of aesthetic mysteries, his works sold in sufficiently large numbers to ensure their collection in a series of popular editions maintained for many decades by the biggest of Bengali publishers; and if some other translations of Shakespeare exhibit more literary merit than his adaptation of 'Hamlet', the latter version alone drew eager crowds continuously over several years. Admittedly its principal attraction came from uncle Amar's magnificent performance in the title role; and yet the choice of that particular part may well signify a breadth of outlook rare in an age when dramas were either devotional or domestic. A clearer attempt at discarding all traditional props appeared in his last play built around the closing years of Napoleon; and so sure was his instinct for theatrical proprieties that, though by the time of his death he had only finished the first draft, the piece earned his son a good price from an astute producer who however lost the manuscript before it could be put on the stage. But uncle Amar's unconcern with conscious experiment and pure expression did not prevent him from writing critically

about his profession; and, in the journal he founded and edited for this purpose, he published an autobiographical novel which had the qualities of a best-seller.

His intellectual accomplishments presuppose wide reading in his own as well as in general subjects; and I cannot imagine how he found time for all this. Having gone to bed only after dawn, he was unable to begin his day much before eleven in the morning; and by then his sitting room would seem about to burst from the pressure of the motley crowd composed of his co-workers with their mobile faces, miming gestures, and ranging voices, ragging one another or telling vivid stories whose occult obscenity challenged my understanding in vain. They stopped talking just long enough to greet uncle Amar as he came in; and, even before he had squatted beside his cylindrical cushion sheathed in white, the resumed hubbub would swirl round him, reminding me of the whirlpool encircling the Marble Rock at Jubbalpore. But however intense his concentration, he could seldom get through the agenda a secretary had prepared for him earlier; the day-to-day problems connected with the business of running a theatre would inevitably emerge out of the general conversation; and when, after solving the immediate ones, he would at last let himself be reminded by my mother's frequent messengers that he had not yet taken his first meal, the clock would be striking the third hour of the afternoon. No wonder that he would already have consumed a considerable quantity of neat brandy to keep himself going; and at five would begin his evening duties on and off the stage.

No one can exist for long under such strain; and by electing to suffer it uncle Amar ended his career at a point where most other people just start guessing what their potentialities might be. Worse still, the consequences of his conduct went beyond personal catastrophe to blight the future of his son; and though I mention the latter primarily because he was my only other male cousin, yet he must be considered a person in his own right, lovable and loving, as promising in his youth as he looked pathetic in his prime. For before he could arrive at an understanding of his particular nature, he had yielded to the example

of his father; and if the resultant simulation of paternal weaknesses often seemed colourable, he never developed into a conquering rebel with a thousand flaws in his shining armour, but remained a misguided conformist whose bad habits turned into vice through subconscious self-condemnation. Thus, having lost all his capital in one incompetent attempt to run a theatre, he made his financial distress hopelessly acute by indiscriminate borrowing; he refused to legalize his life-long liaison with the woman he loved, because she happened to be the unacknowledged daughter of a circus proprietor; and, as the consequence of such frustrations, he passed from his juvenile pleasure in intoxicants to become a slave to opium. Even so he wrote a saleable novel; his half-finished play about Adam and Eve and the wily Serpent contained passages of arresting eloquence; and it was in his imitative magazine that my poor verses appeared for the first time.

Religion too counted as one of his deplorable failings; and some of the superstitions through which this expressed itself were, to say the least, disconcerting. Or so the cyclist might have thought who, going to work in the small hours of a morning immediately after a slight earthquake, found my cousin prostrate on the street in front of our house, and on picking him up under the excusable impression that he had somehow been hurt, received a veritable shower of abuse, because the latter had obviously been praising God for his escape from possible death; and when later I heard of the misadventure, my cousin asked me with indignation what sort of an infidel the stranger could be that he did not even know that, while an injured person usually falls on his back or side, only a Hindu in prayer lies flat on his face. For my cousin was a timid man, especially frightened by all manifestations of nature's violence; and even during a mild storm his voice would drown the sound of the wind as he repeated the incantations which his cave-dwelling ancestors had used on such occasions. All the same he braved the full fury of my mother's wrath by refusing to be married off in accordance with the time-honoured prescription for cure of irregular attachments; and I often wish that his betters had

shown similar courage and integrity in comparable circumstances.

XII

Four years ago he died in the arms of his life-long companion, recognizing thus her steadfast devotion, although he knew that if he spent his last days in our house he would have more of creature comfort and medical attention; and now that he has ceased to be I seem to cling to the memory of his unfailing gaiety in the face of heart-breaking adversities. He belonged to the same age as my elder sister who predeceased him by some forty-five years; and yet this is not why I remember his youth so clearly, but because then, as later, he proved by his everyday conduct that for him all men were really brothers. My sister, on the other hand, never let me forget that I happened to be the naughtiest of boys kept in his place by constant threat of chastisement; and since she had barely reached seventeen when she passed away after a lingering illness, she found no time to rectify her mistake. My cousin became in consequence the sole repository of my fraternal attachment to a person older than myself; and he discharged the obligation this imposed on him by considering me his equal in my childhood. For he was genuinely humble in spirit unlike most members of our family and here, no less than in his fellow feeling for sufferers of all description, he resembled my grandmother even if she was wholly good and he was a mass of weaknesses just redeemed by the quality of his comprehensive mercy.

The position of women in Indian society has been widely misunderstood; and, as a corrective to the popular presentation of their hard lot, it seems worth-while remembering that God for a Hindu is more often a mother than a father. Thus her human counterpart can generally count on the adoration of her children or at least bemoan their certain damnation when they withhold her due; and while the early years in the lives of her sons' wives are indeed difficult, especially now that they

no longer enter their husbands' households as teachable girls with no minds of their own, immediately on becoming mothers-in-law they too acquire quasi-divinity. My grandmother's advantages surpassed the normal ones: she was not merely one of several seniors in a perpetuating joint family, but the widow of a man who had broken away from his clan; and the unrivalled authority she derived from her lonely state could have been converted into absolute power because her sons were too young to deserve or desire any deference. Instead she elected self-effacement, which saints supposedly seek, although the few so designated to me showed not a trace of it; and whereas her daughters-in-law received encouragement to think that they ran the complicated show, she never gave the remotest indication that the chores requiring infinite patience had been assumed by her.

Her appearance helped her desire to remain inconspicuous: neither light nor dark described her skin; her spare frame just failed to reach medium height; her narrow eyes looked hooded like my father's; and if her features had been finer, she had robbed them of their distinction by cropping her iron-grey hair very short, as was expected of widows at the time. For the same reason she never wore any sewn garment; and the prescribed white of her cotton sari suggested cleanliness that avoided the glaring quality. Hard though it is to believe, I cannot recall a single instance of her gentle voice rising in remonstrance, or even putting on an edge when circumstances would have justified unconcealed rage; and so great was her consideration that she had cured herself of the universal habit of Indian mothers to be present at their sons' meals because to have done so would have deprived her daughters-in-law of a chance to talk to their husbands. But to spare others the annoyance she had taken on herself the duty of tending the sick and feeding the children; and to her I used to run for my first breakfast of crystallized cheese long before anyone else stirred in the house. Thus I came to call her 'Sweet Mother' in my very infancy; and this described her nature with such exactitude that soon it became her only name.

Soft as she was to others, her strictness to herself admitted of no mitigation whatsoever; and refusing all but the most literal interpretation of the scriptural laws regarding the conduct of widows, she slept on the thinnest of woollen mats spread on the hardest of floors, ate only once a day a bowlful of milk and fruit, and drank nothing else except the unfiltered water of the Hooghly, brought daily from the sacred river in a pair of earthen pitchers suspended by hempen rope from the two ends of a pole of split bamboo carried athwart the shoulder of a muscular porter. Their content was then poured into a settling jar perhaps deep enough to draw the mud down, but the germs accumulating inside could have been rendered harmless through faith alone; and this my grandmother knew. For not a drop of the poison would she let another touch; and yet her constitution withstood it for eighty-two years, without one physical illness in the meantime, although her purity and piety, her innocence and loving kindness received no consideration from most of the world's sorrows. At last when she died in 1932, she had lost three sons, two daughters-in-law and two grandchildren; my father who outlived her was far away with the rest of the family; I lay dangerously ill in Calcutta; and after keeping her decomposing body for forty-eight hours in the April heat of Benares, strangers consigned her to the flames.

The ceremony, which followed a month later to speed the departed to the abode of unprofitable bliss and to mark the end of our manifest mourning, was so full of pomp, so out of harmony with the simplicity of her retiring nature that during the four days the spectacle took to spend itself I remained mostly shut up in my room, trying to recapture my grandmother's essence, and failing inevitably because pure goodness is not an abstraction that encourages verbal jugglery, but a mode of being as incontrovertible when physically encountered in another as it is unknowable in one's own life; and even now her memory distracts me from my growing conviction that, since good and evil are inseparable complementaries, the better our intentions, the worse our actions in the ultimate result. No doubt she too added at least indirectly to the sum of human

misery through over-indulgence of her children and the refusal to assume legitimate authority, especially in the early years after the death of her husband; and yet without her example our family could easily have split into warring factions, instead of counting among its positive achievements a rare tolerance for incompatibles. Conceivably therefore my grandmother had not shirked her duties; and though secretly instilled, her spirit of accommodation had come to permeate the entire household.

XIII

It was a large one by modern standards, comprising in its heyday some seventy-five heads, including members of the family proper, poor relations, dependants, employees of different status, and servants; and of the last two groups a good number belonged to the Mohammedan faith which excluded them from the common kitchen but not from the comity of most other corporate activities. They seemed on the whole the readiest to divert the children; and from one of them, who possessed the loveliest Bengali handwriting that I have ever seen, I learnt my first alphabet. If they did not eat our food, we ate theirs; and though from humanitarian considerations my father lived on milk and vegetables eked out with small quantities of rice and wheat, the male side of the family was omnivorous. The women observed the Hindu taboos by choice; and while widows like my youngest aunt eschewed altogether meat, fish, and eggs, beside many other unclean items, such as onions, her only daughter, just a year older than me and, consequently, my playmate, enjoyed liberties almost similar to mine. Criticism, loud and pungent, could certainly be heard from time to time and its total suppression would have meant giving up the freedom of speech. Yet no real interference occurred with another's preference; and when paths crossed, tragedies did not follow. Even my mother looked like an exception proving the rule; and despite her opposing pull, her children developed pretty much in their own way.

To misquote one of India's leading thinkers, incomparable in its power of assimilation, Hinduism is a way of life aiming at the absolute unity of all possible diversities; and, if only in a Pickwickian sense, the words should apply to the spirit of our household, unless my early impressions have been disturbed by later megalomania. However I am not consciously exaggerating my claim; I realize on the contrary that the almost simultaneous death of my two uncles and the need for more space, as I with my brothers and sisters began to grow up, were but superficial factors in the ultimate breakdown of the joint family; and when, after the inevitable disintegration, I reached the age of antagonism to my parents, I censured them because the destructive antinomies inherent in the system they upheld had by then come out into the open, leaving an unbridgeable gap between their profession and practice. I see now that the obtrusive contradictions resulted less from Hindu habits than from the alien ethics arbitrarily incorporated into them; and, however intense my antipathy for much of the former, my lack of tolerance for the Victorians is a reflection of their smug intolerance. At least in my boyhood the atmosphere of our house was the opposite of stuffy; and yet it smelt unmistakably parochial.

Chairs and tables, for instance, formed no conspicuous part of the furniture; and large mattresses covered in white occupied the floors or low platforms of wood for people to sit cross-legged. Meals too were eaten squatting on squares of carpet or plank put down on the ground; and while the fingers of the right hand served the purpose of cutlery, crockery and glass gave place to platters, bowls, and tumblers of shining bell-metal, which withdrew in favour of white, black, red, and yellow marble, or even gleaming silver, depending on the importance of the special occasion or on the degree of deference a guest deserved. The daily menu provided at least four flavours—bitter, salt, sour, and sweet, succeeding one another in the order indicated; and rice appeared as the staple in the morning, white flour at night. Meat remained reserved for feasts; but fish of three or four kinds showed up both at lunch and dinner;

and breakfast consisted of milk, cut fruits being the refreshment for the late afternoon. Until I came back from school with the bad habit of drinking tea, non-alcoholic beverages of exotic origin seldom entered the household; and only the sick consumed aerated waters, as also bread in the form of loaves. Those who smoked used aromatic narghiles with coils of tinsel pipes; and visitors received offerings of perfumed pan prepared throughout the forenoon by the younger members of the female hierarchy and stored in enormous boxes of silver stamped with male names.

In his younger days my eldest uncle had worn European suits made by foreign tailors well established in Calcutta; but the disguise had been assumed only during the cool months when holidaying out of town; and even at such times he had not carried a hat which had somehow been looked on as so much more grotesque than a golfing cap of Scottish tweed. Nor did an Inverness cape appear ridiculous, although the unfoppish preferred the equally shapeless outer coat called ulster; and under it every man in our family wore the *dhoti*—a white piece of handwoven muslin with a coloured edge—and a loose shirt without cuffs and collar. For most of the year the outer casing became unthinkably unnecessary; and in the dog days of midsummer the all-time upper garment would be discarded at home. The nether cloth was however kept on waking and sleeping; and our personal servants spent the greater part of their working hours plaiting and frilling these starched lengths measuring five-and-a-half yards with a width of forty-eight to fifty-four inches. Younger women put on saris, occasionally dyed and often striped or checked; and for formal festivities they discarded cotton in favour of brocade, overloading themselves with an infinity of gold and precious stones and concealing their lack of shoes under a red paint.

The gaudiest fineries made their competitive appearance mostly at marriages; and frequently though they happened in the houses of our friends and relations, only one took place in our family during my early years. This was the wedding of my elder sister; and of that occasion I remember little except the

rows upon rows of diners who filled every nook and cranny of our sizeable house from dusk till midnight. As for the great religious ceremonies, I cannot recall any at all; and the reason is that we celebrated none owing to my grandmother's dislike of ostentation, my father's insistence that the best worship is private, and the infirmity my eldest uncle had brought upon himself through the earthy preoccupations of his youth. Yet such times provided much excitement for us: the circle of our connexions and acquaintances extended throughout the city; and the four-day feast of Durga marking the end of the monsoon brought us perhaps a thousand invitations personally conveyed by blood relations of the hosts. Etiquette demanded for each a return visit; and neither its duration nor the caller's age mattered at all, what counted being his right to represent his seniors. Sons and nephews were therefore freely employed both as appellants and respondants; and in an emergency even toddlers became conscripts for the preservation of social solidarity.

XIV

Uncle Dhiren as head of the family received the letters of invitation printed in gold or red on hand-made paper of white or yellow hue; and after the household scribe had classified them area-wise, grouping together neighbouring streets and tabulating the sequence of numbers in each, I and my brothers put on new clothes and set out separately on the round of visits which for every one of us totalled perhaps three hundred, to be run through in six lots occupying three mornings and three evenings, all equally long and equally fatiguing. To spare our own horses, however, we were provided with hackney carriages; and none lacked a bossy and voluble attendant who introduced his charge to the successive hosts, had the calls recorded, supplied the shining silver rupees for the juvenile guest to place on the mounting heap of coins at the foot of the image, and ticked off the addresses on the list carried by the

party. Instead of being thrown away, the itineraries remained carefully filed, so that when the time arrived for us to return hospitality, no labour would be wasted on preparing fresh inventories or checking omissions; and though we tended to avoid seasonal celebrations of a semi-public nature, entertainments requiring a largish audience were not infrequent in our house.

Among them I liked best *jatras*, to give their proper name to the combination of drama and opera performed not on a stage, but in a clearing at the very centre of a big gathering, the actors pushing their way through the squatting crowd to come and go; and if, as in the musical comedy, the protagonists burst into song to point to an emotional crisis, a chorus reminiscent of the Classical tragedy made good the total lack of scenery and interposed a melodic bridge between breaks in action, due, I suppose, to the pieces being put together by anonymous authors whose inspiration seemed consensual like that of folk art. Of shorter duration were the recitations of epics, where the narrators used a half chant, accompanied by a great deal of fluid gestures; and positively boring I found the readings from the books of myths, interrupted after every couplet or quatrain to let the commentator disburden himself of interminable platitudes. Fortunately the adults found conjuring tricks no less absorbing than sermons from wandering scholars; and many jugglers received a hearty welcome in our principal court which on such occasions wore a temporary roofing of reeds, an inner ceiling of chequered cloth, and curtains of lace all along the first floor verandahs to hide the ladies from the view of the gentlemen below.

On three sides of the main court ran a pillared shelf giving access to the public rooms and the household offices; and on the fourth side stood a pavilion-like structure in two compartments, where the more elaborate rituals took place when necessary, and at other times room could be found for thirty or forty guests sitting down to a secular meal. Topped by three arches resting on clusters of columns, the high base of the lofty hall had a flight of marble steps all along its width;

and these formed a convenient gallery during spectacles and a lounge on ordinary afternoons. For the stairs, as also the stone-paved yard and its appurtenances, were kept spotless by a special servant whose sole duty consisted of sweeping and scrubbing floors twice a day; and the washing and mopping of the inner apartments being almost constant required much application on the part of every maid. Indeed, for my mother cleanliness had become a fetish in the psycho-analytical sense of the word; and many a hard slap did I receive, because I touched her unwittingly after she had finished her morning bath of purification. But once she had eaten her luncheon, we ceased to be untouchables until her evening ablutions; and then again she became inviolable right up to dinner.

Other women in the household were certainly less extreme than my mother; and yet they showed as much concern as she about keeping their world immaculate. This centred round an inner court at the back of the tall pavilion; and while their common rooms occupied the ground floor, the second and the third storeys barely accommodated the bedrooms, two of which and a sitting room in the masculine part of the house being the usual allotment for each segment of the family. Two more yards formed the rear of an oblong measuring a third of an acre; and the one adjoining the feminine side contained four kitchens, a set of bathrooms for the mistresses, living quarters for the maids, a barn for storing fodder, the cowsheds, and a penthouse with a well in the middle where the dinner services of bell-metal, the cooking pots of brass, and the great cauldrons of iron were burnished with the ash from the long, low ovens. The other yard behind the public sector comprised men's conveniences, cubicles for the male servants, a large coach-house and stables for eight horses; and, tied one after another down the lane separating our house from the next, the fine animals, white and grey, roan and bay, dappled and black, neighed and snorted and tossed their manes in response to the rubbing and brushing and patting of the grooms.

The main building, within or without, possessed no feature comparable to the equine grace; and the only decoration it

carried on the street front was a row of cast-iron figures which made our dwelling known in the neighbourhood and beyond as 'the house with dolls'. The dwarfs measured about two feet in height, but seemed taller, because they stood on fluted pedestals of stucco, reinforced by a wrought-iron balustrade imitating imaginary acanthus of unbelievable ugliness; they carried dangling swords on their left flanks; and if this conferred on them a military air, the uniform they wore had never been seen on any soldier, living or dead. While their waxed moustachioes and pointed beards suggested the improbable combination of a charlatan and a clown, they were unproductive to the point of being completely useless, and whereas their left hands had found eternal rest on their belted waists, their right arms remained raised in vain. For the gas jets they once held had ceased to burn a year before my birth; and the fact that the electric lights inside had not yet succeeded in driving out candles and oil lamps rendered the gesture of outmoded illumination merely grotesque. Yet that was the very reason of their pathetic charm; and I may not be altogether fanciful when I worry about their symbolic significance.

XV

The derelicts of the gas age wanted perhaps to warn all passers-by that the chthonic darkness they had failed to abolish seemed the more visible in the glow of the copper filaments burning red within pear-shaped bulbs; and though of these there was no lack in the public part of our house, the corridors and steps leading to the inner apartments carried only kerosene lanterns which certainly formed integral parts of a primeval obscurity. When I explained to uncle Dhiren that the black radiation from such sources so frightened me that I could not answer my mother's call, he detailed his principal servant to accompany me, but never considered any alternative plan for brightening the interior; and he justified the prevalence of gloom by pointing out how needlessly uneconomical it would

be to use electricity for showing up what benign custom had decided to keep private. The argument looked undoubtedly comic against the evidence of his past extravagance; and equally silly sounded my father's contention that his eyesight should improve if he read with the help of candles. Meanwhile, however, in the lamp room under the main staircase an old retainer continued to fill rows of squat glasses with water and a two-inch topping of castor oil; and after the floating wicks of rolled cotton-wool had been lit, one enclosed in a glass box was placed in every bedchamber to keep ghosts and goblins away.

To me their unseen presence became thereby almost manifest; and even though I shut my eyes resolutely once I had been tucked inside the huge mosquito curtain, I would be disturbed by the breathing of my brother and sister who shared the tent of gauze with my mother and me. Soon the hardness of the floor would penetrate into my bones through the thick mattress; and, as the stray jackals prowling in the waste land beyond the back wall of our house uttered their first cry, the archaic night of brooding jungles and cowering hamlets would send her terrible emissaries to peer through the windows. The one I dreaded most was the wicked spirit of a vengeful Brahmin; and far from staying put in the vacant ground in the rear, he had built a nest in the deodar on the road front. Worse still, he did not wait for it to grow really dark, but began his evil operations the moment dusk fell; and his insane rages were absolutely unpredictable. Or so at least a servant of ours thought when in all innocence he spat one evening at the foot of the haunted tree to find himself possessed; and the exorcism, purchased after several failures at a very stiff price, proved the fearful might of this particular devil. For before he left he made his temporary minion carry with the help of teeth alone the largest of our brass waterpots from one side of the house to the other; and at the end of the ordeal the poor creature looked deader than any human being could.

The occurrence antedated my birth by some months; and my personal experience in connexion with it consisted only of a

share in the vague menace of its aftermath. But even as repeatedly reported by my younger cousin, the volatile son of uncle Amar, the affair possessed a reality missing altogether from the instances of witchcraft I witnessed later; and I guess that sorcerers were called in whenever the author of a petty theft had to be discovered, just because the police, more corrupt than the former, acted equally incompetently. At all events the magicians did not expect large rewards for beating up each suspect without extracting any confession: instead, they distributed charmed rice to everybody; and if none choked chewing this, incantations read over bamboo sticks failed also to point to the culprit. A gesture had, however, been made, proving to the world that, humane though the household was, it did not condone crime; and those who, nevertheless, objected that the futile practice seemed too obsoletely rustic to receive support in the second city of the British Empire, could perhaps be told that, supposing the procedure had by a miracle succeeded, the course of justice would have acquired the compulsive authority of the occult, satisfying and sacrosanct unlike the guardians of Law.

Ambivalence was indeed the most obvious characteristic of Calcutta in the first ten years of the century: always a hybrid, the city then looked like a village at almost every turn of its streets; and each rural area formed a backwater so distinct in flora and fauna that a drive from the northern edge of the town to the southern extremity became an adventure, involving not only a midway change in horses but also endemic variations of speech. Lanes, seldom visited by the sun, narrowed to a thousand dank trails between garbage-vomiting houses of a stifling squalor; and while by contrast the tree-lined main roads seemed woefully few, all thoroughfares, irrespective of their shape or size, disappeared under the stinking water from the overflowing drains when it rained for any length of time. Occasionally the flood lasted for several days even in front of our house which stood on a principal artery of the town; and if, greatly to my disappointment, boats, regular or improvised, seldom appeared in the locality, the monsoon provided many

opportunities for unadulterated laughter, because unwary pedestrians never failed to fall into submerged potholes of surprising depth. Certain districts remained inundated for perhaps three months; and the alleys transformed into cesspools did not revert to dungheaps until the dry season.

The 'cold weather', unfortunately all too brief, was the best time of the year; but the plague of mosquitoes it brought along made life unendurable after dark; and worse still, at its height, the upper atmosphere became so fresh that the smoke of numberless fires, unable to escape, solidified into smog which drew tears from reddened eyes and cough from prickling throats. For however lofty the boundary walls wherewith the mansions endeavoured to keep out the circumambient huts and hovels, the polluted air belonged to all; and the stately homes also contributed to it by using open ovens, just as they proved by the architectural absurdities they affected that Calcutta's lack of civic sense formed part of a more fundamental disproportion. In any case, the sharpest of dividing lines between town and country was a slimy canal; and though the enormous boats tied to its banks had travelled for three or four weeks through the endless waterways of unchanging Bengal to bring the metropolis mountains of hay and millions of earthen pots, at least a dozen short bridges could be crossed to reach what seemed like the very heart of a primitive land. Thus at certain points only half a mile separated a fantastic palace from a perennial paddy-swamp; and the great houses repeated the pervasive contradiction in their Corinthian pillars and neo-Gothic arches.

XVI

Put together by Muslim craftsmen innocent of Western lore, these ambiguous monuments of Victorian bad taste remained mercifully lost among centenarian banyans and tamarinds; and this was even truer of the suburban villas like uncle Dhiren's garden house. Built for the pleasures of the rich within

coconut plantations, they displayed unclad nymphs at the end of every prospect; but lichen became the keeper of modesty in record time; and as to their interior decorations consisting of nudes in canvas and bronze, photogravure copies of Landseer and Leighton, Empire sofas and Consul tables, gilded clocks and lustred candelabra, they too could pass unnoticed, apparently because custom did not stale what went on in the marble halls; and money anyhow received so little consideration from those who had it once that no sooner did things fall into disrepair than funds were unavailable for their renovation. Unfortunately other dichotomies could neither be as easily disregarded, nor left simply to the destructive care of time; and the city's disharmony reached the peak when any of its black inhabitants crossed over to the white reserve except in a menial capacity. The resultant tension grew intolerable; and the nameless dread that the intruder experienced then matched the needless arrogance of the other side, both deriving from the common anguish of unresolved opposition.

The Anglo-Bengalis, so-called, or the Wogs, to give the Westernized Oriental Gentlemen the name they had earned among their white neighbours, stood foremost among those who had tried in vain to end the conflict; and their failure was the easiest to explain. For to avoid being rent into twain, they had cut their moorings altogether, but found no haven across the gulf; and marooned now on a bank of shifting sand in the midst of the rising tide, they led the existence of an outcast community, reviled and ridiculed by turns, aping manners they had never quite mastered, concealing habits they could not wholly eradicate, and all the time making the worst of both worlds. Tagore said of them that they had forgotten their mother tongue without learning to speak English; and crueller stories related how, when they returned to their mortgaged homes after running through their meagre patrimony in a year's fling at Oxford or Cambridge, they had to sit on inverted baskets for lack of chairs, and eat banana flower with kitchen ladles, because spoons were scarce in the neighbourhood. Whatever the exaggeration in such tales, there is no doubt that their convi-

vial conversation revolved round their estranged adolescence; their clothes, if outlandish, were outmoded as well as unseasonable; and their hatred of the British, though often repressed, possessed a bitterness that even neurotic 'natives' could seldom rival. Even so the unemployed gnomes in front of our house did not represent these figures of fun; and today I am almost sure that our toy sentries presaged my particular heritage.

Casting about, in my snobbish youth, for an illustrated motto to put at my letterheads, I took from the Rig Veda a fragment of the hymn to light and, placing a burning lamp under the devanagri script, added a gothic D to form a design of the grossest asymmetry; and as the last detail showed, I imitated Goethe, at best half-consciously. Yet the desire to possess a patent of nobility, even if forged, was not the only motive behind my pitiable lack of taste; and while in this act of simulation I merely followed the example of countless Calcutta families no older than mine, unlike them, I felt overwhelmed by an inner and obsessive darkness that I have been unable either to dispel or to accept. To me at least, the outer world of twilight in which my childhood passed seems an emanation of deeper shadows; and I still cannot understand what it all amounted to—the combination of rationalism and obscurantism in my father, of respectability and libertinage in uncle Dhiren, of cruelty and kindness in my mother, the consulting of astrologers before a journey, the economic interpretation of caste, and the denigration of logic by logic. Lesser levels too proliferated antinomies; and thus it never sufficed to call a qualified doctor when illness occurred, but quacks also came in by the back door, so that no road to recovery should remain unexplored. In fact the latter enjoyed greater prestige; and an Italian herbalist continued to be revered in our household even after he had killed himself with his own treatment.

Spengler might provide a generic answer to my specific problems; and my mind is such an unstable compound of the East and the West that I would be the last person to assert that cultures survive the atrophy of civilization by the interchange

of rejuvenating concepts. Of course, 'The Decline of the West' did not reach India until the late 'twenties; and already then a great many absurdities deriving from the meeting of the Orient and the Occident had disappeared. The book was therefore widely welcomed as proving our axiomatic superiority; and though few read it beyond the title page, Eddington and Jeans arrived only a little later to supply plenty of quotations for the refutation of science. But even before they spoke teachers of hygiene had returned home from their lectures to swallow humbly a mouthful of unfiltered water turned into nectar in consequence of touching the feet of the family Deity; and still numberless are the professors of economics who gaily continue to multiply their kind while urging that the country's woes spring from overpopulation. Needless to say, an adolescent could make nothing of these paradoxes; and his age alone prevented his concluding cynically that the Hindu's tolerance meant no more than discarding his principle of life when earning a living and vice versa.

The Hindu boasted also that in itself his universe remained the one example of complete integration; and yet so fragmented was the society he had established that no part of it ever bothered so much as to impede the most alien of intruders. Even his women formed an absolutely separate world; and I could not go through my nonage without becoming instinctively aware that what we had imported from Europe in the course of a century had been exhausted in building a new facade for a building of antique design, possessing strength enough in its foundations to withstand all upheavals over two thousand and five hundred years. Its cellars looked as gloomy as its attics seemed bright; and if the top and the bottom were too far apart to be viewed together, neither could exist independently of the other. Perhaps for that very reason, when I began my boyish exploration of the great edifice, the underground chambers felt like dungeons exuding claustrophobia, while the rarefied air of the garrets could hardly be breathed; and in the meantime the bizarre frontage beckoned disarmingly, mainly because I saw it from the vantage point of my mother's

family. This made the prospect familiar; and at least in contrast to the agnate side, the cognate surface appeared positively brilliant.

My maternal grandfather, Probodh Chandra Mallik, was the eldest of three brothers, the second of whom offended the orthodox by becoming the first Indian to study at the University of Cambridge; and the refusal of the other two to ostracize him on his return compelled all of them to quit the obsolescent locality where their teeming kinsfolk lived in half a dozen houses of massive proportions. Neither the shape, nor the size, of the buildings could however be guessed from outside: a lane, just wide enough to let a carriage pass, took the sharpest turns among the huddle of weathered bricks; and within, notwithstanding a large courtyard or two, the day looked murkier than the night. For on every festive occasion festoons of artificial lights blazed in the habitual penumbra; and if the air remained forever foetid, nautch girls ogled endlessly to divert the perspiring guests from the difficulty of breathing. As to the preening hosts, their corpulence patently personified wealth; but health did not reside in their sallow complexion; and even thirty or forty years later, when a bit of the sun had at last been allowed into the least mouldy of the mansions, the atmosphere seemed so devoid of happiness that the dissenting trio must have welcomed the enforced separation from their native element.

Nor did their good luck stop there; and unlike many of their contemporaries, they were not drawn into the whirl of militant outcasts, because their mother's brother, one of the first Bengalis to earn a great name in English journalism, used his immense prestige to make the Hindu society condone their deviation. Transparently honest in his zeal for reform, he had always condemned the excesses of apostasy; and though in the dark days of the Mutiny he had sided against his countrymen, believing that the British rule provided India with the one impetus for self-improvement, he offended the victors in the aftermath by pointing to the difference between reciprocative atrocities and retributive justice. That however added love to the respect the indigenous Calcutta felt for him; and when he

invited the leaders of his community to lunch, all came with alacrity. But, contrary to his habit, he did not receive the guests at the door of his rambling house; and even after they had taken their places in the dining hall he would not join them. Instead, he halted outside the threshold to inform the hushed assembly that beside him stood his nephew just returned from England; and while with folded hands he begged his betters to consider if love of learning should count as sin, he reminded those who thought his sister's son unacceptable on this account that to avoid contamination they had only to leave untouched the food placed before them.

Since nobody cared or dared to make the first move, the incident became for my mother a miraculous legend showing how Providence had intervened to safeguard her family's right to the Hindu heaven; and it angered her to be told that the situation created by the old journalist's dramatic sense was saved only because he excelled as a stage manager. But his failure to carry the fateful day, far from causing a tragedy, might in fact have provided a happy ending to high adventure; and rejected by their co-religionists, his nephews could have found a congenial haven in the Brahmo Samaj. For that protestant movement had just then reached the moment of calm between the flow and ebb of tide; and though the present guardians of the new ethics seem to resemble their humdrum neighbours in all except name, their forefathers three-quarters of a century ago formed a dedicated community, surprisingly rich in talent and character. Moreover, accepting the identity of virtue and knowledge, they freed themselves quickly from the trammel of the caste system; and this aspect of their doctrine could not but attract my mother's older uncle Manmatha, whose hankering after outlandish education had brought the family to the brink of excommunication. At any rate, when in later life he took to writing monumental volumes on political and moral philosophy, what he described as Hindu ideals differed little from those that the followers of Ram Mohan Roy had pursued for the preceding five or six decades; and that he expressed himself in English, whereas the Brahmo thinkers preferred on

the whole their mother tongue, did nothing to add or subtract from their debt to the West.

As to Hem, the youngest of my mother's uncles, his nature was too prodigal to discover merit in the thrift of self-righteous Brahmos; and yet he made monogamous prejudice so much his own that, though he missed no opportunity for squandering vast sums of money, he could never bring himself to keep even a single mistress. Nor did he rest content with the personal renunciation of an immemorial right, but broke completely with his father-in-law, because of the latter's partiality for servants with pretty wives; and if the quarrel lacked moral originality, it demanded of Hem a reckless disregard of consequence rare among puritans in any age. For his wife was the only surviving child of the rich widower whose possessions would therefore devolve on her son, provided the old man had not given or willed them away to somebody else out of pique; and however high-minded initially, the whole business began to look distinctly wrong-headed as soon as the legal heir, grown at last to astute manhood, set himself the thankless task of counteracting the ancient mischief. Otherwise too the protest against masculine licence remained incomplete; and while the ladies of the house found themselves in the exclusive possession of their better halves, they forfeited for that very reason the countervailing privileges my aunts, for example, exacted from their inconstant husbands.

Only my mother enjoyed the advantages of both worlds; and I cannot help feeling that this was because, born soon after the family's transplantation from the centre of orthodox Calcutta to its dubious fringe, she embodied the illogic inherent in the compromise her elders had made. For, in spite of their disgust with the old order, they would not break away from their constricting community; and to be able to call themselves practising Hindus, they adhered to rites and ceremonies which, serving no more than an ostensible purpose, possessed so little inner coherence that the celebrants came in time to forget that every fruitful act constitutes a term in a teleological series where the will is constant factor. Thus it never sufficed to stop short

at conjugal fidelity, although that marked a laudable advance on the current habits of the promiscuous male; and by avoiding the next step to the inevitable emancipation of women, my mother's people, while escaping the prurient jibes of their contemptible co-religionists, disappointed those they respected and in many ways copied. The latter, fortunately, formed a microscopic minority; and if the matrons of the circle wore no veil, such impudence was a mere by-product of what their spouses called the English way of life. There my mother's uncle, Manmatha, by virtue of his long residence at Christ's College, took precedence over most; and his brothers too could therefore claim admittance to the new caste without abjuring their birthright.

The family's real saviour was, of course, its wealth; and in Calcutta, where tradition had always come after the love of lucre, money talked the loudest. But naturally enough this endemic trait showed most clearly among the Anglo-Bengalis, of whom I spoke earlier; and if the residue of the caste system in their unconscious compelled them, all unknowingly, to create yet another order with as rigid a code of conduct as any in the Hindu hierarchy, the ritual prescribed for the congregation proved very expensive. Only a double crossing of the seven seas entitled one to the full membership of the sect; and since such initiation affected one's blood relations, its magical properties could also be extended to incorporate the latter as affiliates. Even a novice knew, however, that to become more British than the British required unlimited credit; and though the white tradesmen seemed quite pleased to confer on him the proud privilege of hiding his black body in unseasonable frock-coats, of crowding his cramped house with convoluted furniture, of introducing to his stables broken-winded Walers and so forth, they possessed too little understanding of high finance to cultivate infinite patience. My mother's people, on the contrary, paid no heed to budgetary considerations; luxuries played the same part in their life as necessities in that of others; and better still, they kept no count of the number of sacramental sun-

downers their visitors consumed, while champagne dinners were not just a topic of conversation at their table.

Although their new house on an open square lacked architectural distinction, it avoided the grotesque admixture of styles evident in the older quarters of the city; and if the absence of the traditional courtyard darkened some of the rooms, a tennis court separating the public and the private apartments gave the whole building a foreign air appreciably enhanced by a profusion of the best mid-Victorian furniture, the costliest carpets, the heaviest hangings and massive frames of gold containing paintings concealed under coatings of the blackest varnish. The pictures were mostly copies from the lesser masters of the Dutch and the Venetian schools; but the owners had paid such high prices for them that they refused to believe this; and however consciously they imitated the English, they considered themselves far superior to their models, because from day to day the latter spent much less by way of energy and money. At any rate, the personal bearers, who brought them bed-tea and out-of-season fruits, wore whiter liveries and bigger turbans with the family crest in real silver; the subsequent ablutions took place in porcelain baths of huge proportions; the round breakfast table covered in crackling damask carried the finest china, hall-marked cutlery and plate and unimpeachable cut glass; and whereas in general Indian dishes of every sort appeared at luncheon, dinner, even when no guest had been asked, consisted of soup, fish, joint, sweet and savoury.

The bill of fare got immeasurably longer for parties; and sometimes no less than forty-eight men sat down to the endless repast, all looking like penguins in their hyperborean dress clothes. Of course it needed an act of heroic will to don such garments in Calcutta where for nine months in the year the temperature seldom fell below 70 Fahrenheit; and the significance of procedure became clear to me only half a century later when during a trek in Sikkim at 14,000 feet above sea level I opened the door of a log cabin to a British major on a night of howling winds and incipient snow. He had come riding over

the Thibetan wilderness, covering in twelve hours a distance that normally required twenty-four; and in order to be able to cross the tricky pass before dusk, he had started at the crack of dawn without so much as a cup of tea. But on hearing me remark, 'what, no breakfast', he forgot both fatigue and hunger; a deep flush suffused his drawn cheeks; and he replied in a guilty voice, 'Yes, living among natives in the back of the beyond, one does grow slack, doesn't one?'. I am now inclined to believe that the male attire in my mother's family showed at least initially the same regard for morals; and though by the time I reached boyhood the British had begun to be hated, however covertly, yet would my elders, especially on the maternal side, reprimand me for my inability to emulate the foreigner's refusal to let extenuating circumstances modify an irksome routine.

Neither my mother's uncles, nor their Anglo-Bengali friends made the least concession to such weakness; and their repudiation of indigenous laxity seemed the more stoical, because the formality of their westernized deportment owed nothing to the exacting company of the fair sex. Indeed, women, whether belonging to the family or to its familiars, never appeared in the public sector of the house; and if in spite of this its largest hall had been given a floor of polished wood so as to deserve the name of ball-room, the adjoining library was by no means a mere showpiece. For although the rows upon rows of well-bound books looked new, most of them bore marginal notes which testified to the application and acumen of their readers; and there, after the frequent dinner parties, the graver guests ensconced themselves in armchairs of green and brown morocco to celebrate their freedom from female tyranny by discussing wishful politics. The hosts of course provided alternative diversions for the less serious; and while the less taciturn could choose between cards and billiards, the talkative would in the season pass from the morning's ride to the afternoon's racing with the mists of Ascot slowly blurring the personae of the conversationalists. But a political undercurrent ran through everything they said or thought; and since in open competition

their performance matched that of the privileged British, they bitterly resented their total exclusion from the business of government.

It is idle to speculate on what India would look like today had the black sahibs of the last century taken over the country's administration from their white counterparts; and though I feel certain that another Liberia would not have resulted from the experiment, I am less sure that the Indian Liberals, as they considered themselves, would have done better than their namesake in Japan, where British institutions were sedulously nurtured for six or seven decades. But the propagandists of the West should think twice before attributing this failure to the despotic climate of Asia: Germany's record in the same period seems equally distressing; and I remember the grief with which my father described to me the intrigues whereby Lloyd George destroyed Asquith as well as an entire way of life and a magnanimous view of the world. In any case, nothing could justify the treatment accorded to my father's elders by their spiritual begetters: even when summoned on urgent business, they entered European clubs only through the back door reserved for servants; they lost their railway berths to light-skinned commercial travellers in the middle of the night; most hotels denied them accommodation; they remained segregated in public gardens made out of their own land; and the worst insult of all, every paleface appeared to take perverse pleasure in calling them Babu in deliberate disregard of their patent achievement and latent dissociation.

Thus accosted at a garden party his brothers gave for their foreign acquaintances, the young Rabindranath Tagore, instead of losing his temper, like the rest of us who lacked his ready wit, turned the joke against his inebriated interlocutor by opening his candid eyes wide to remark with pointed surprise, 'The assurance of your manner suggests a long stay in this country, and yet, sir, you remain ignorant of the fact that only our servants must address us as Babu,' and that he did not out of hypersensitiveness ascribe pejorative intent to innocent flattery became abundantly clear when, following the 1919

happenings in the Punjab, Tagore renounced his knighthood to the accompaniment of *The Englishman*'s editorial comment that the said guardian of British interests in India would indeed be glad to revert thereafter to the more appropriate title of Babu in speaking of him. Human dignity should of course suffer no real harm from the insolence of boors; and my mother's uncle Manmatha was not a minor hero because his reply to a governmental communication addressed to Babu M. C. Mallik, began with the official formula: 'From M. C. Mallik Esq. B.A., LL.B. (Cantab), Barrister-at-Law, To Babu X. Y. Smith, Secretary to the Government of India.' But his friends continued to recall the exploit with such relish that they evidently thought so; and if this proved that exaggeration of petty insults had warped their sense of proportion, dubbed Babus, meaning cowardly by birth, unruly by upbringing and polysyllabic by education, they could not gain admission into the Indian army even as privates.

The calumny contained not even a vestige of truth; it sought vainly to disguise the fact that the military forces of the British Raj constituted an army of occupation which, in so far as the natives of the country were concerned, consisted of ignorant mercenaries nurtured in backward reserves; and in order to prevent their contamination by the growing demand for self-government, they not only remained in the exclusive charge of white officers, but also received constant encouragement to believe that the educated Indian could pretend to be their superior just because, possessing an exploiter's cunning, he avoided situations demanding courage and leadership. For already the reverse propaganda had failed to convince the so-called non-martial races that when the British, disgusted with the ingratitude of their benefactors, quit the hapless land, the Pathans and their allies of the north-west would immediately begin their relentless march to Calcutta, murdering men and raping women all along the way; and if by now few remembered to what extremity of panic our protectors had been reduced during the Mutiny, the more students read history the surer they became that while the founders of the Empire

owed at least as much of their success to bribery and intrigue as to bravery, their heirs considered themselves heroes for no other reason except that guns must in the very nature of things prevail over primitive bows and arrows.

Why otherwise, the educated natives asked, should they be prevented from owning firearms; and whereas the answer suggested by the Boer War made their view of the British character seem plausible, it took nearly two more decades for the Kaiser to prove, however unwittingly, that, whether as other ranks or as officers in the actual field of battle, the objects of the white man's burden behaved no less gallantly than its self-proclaimed martyrs. But denied in the meantime all lawful opportunities for demonstrating their fighting qualities, the militant nationalists had already gravitated towards conspiratorial politics; and if the moderates were not craven, because they remained true to constitutional agitation only a dwindling section of the public went on admiring their heroic patience. For, summoned to the royal presence during King George the Fifth's coronation visit to India in 1911, Gokhale, the most temperate of men, told the sovereign that although self-government might not increase the country's happiness, it would certainly bring self-respect to the people; and so devious is the imperial logic that this honest reply to a direct question provoked a homily on the treatment of women. Nor did the ruler alone misunderstand Gokhale's despairing silence at the end of the interview; and while the ruled continued to pour scorn on him for his failure to point out that colour provides as poor a justification for tyranny as sex, the bad world grew madder and sadder.

A modern emperor could not, of course, be expected to emulate Harun al Rashid and the tragic events of the ten previous years had, reasonably enough, aggravated the agoraphobia of the British in India, who for all their show of arrogance found themselves unable to root out the procreative memory of the Mutiny. Even so they showed their ineptitude as administrators in not realizing that the Indian's readiness to incarcerate his wife, to marry off his infant daughters and to impose the

cruellest celibacy and the starkest deprivation on child widows did not connote misogyny, but that his all-surpassing devotion to his mother absolved him, at least according to his own view, from the extra-sexual duties he owed to women in general; and indeed Queen Victoria inspired unstinted loyalty, because she came to assume, whether through design or accident, the attributes of the mother-image. Her family looked askance at the personal concern for the dependency; and when the successors of Lord Ripon learnt that, utterly upset by the pointed reversal of his liberal policy, a number of native leaders were canvassing public opinion for a petition urging one of the Great Mother's sons to found a dynasty so as to perpetuate paternal rule in the country, viceroy after viceroy spoke more and more categorically, castigating the impossible impropriety of imagining the black and the white conjoined in symbolic brotherhood.

According to a recently published eulogy of the British Raj, even Curzon was a missionary of India's self-determination; and I for one am ready to accept this paradoxical conclusion, but because I can just conceive, if only as an intellectual pastime, that his unfounded defamation of the Bengali character, expressed with unflagging energy in words of unparalleled violence, sprang from a passionate love of the people whom he shamed to fight for their freedom, goading them by simulated abuse like the Prophets of the Old Testament. His immediate audience had, however, little taste for speculative psychology; and while the white sahibs, though smarting under his outrageous megalomania, could yet applaud his plain-speaking to the natives, the black ones came perforce to the conclusion that such indignities would never cease as long as they remained alienated from their countrymen. The idea of an egalitarian society did not of course follow at once; the first flush of national awakening induced, on the contrary, dreams of a Hindu revival; and these continued to supply the cutting edge to the subsequent policy of divide and rule until some fifty years later the subcontinent split into Hindustan and Pakistan. Nevertheless Minto, who inherited Curzon's vendetta, went too far when, betrayed by his indubitable foresight, he announced the un-

timely partition of Bengal; and whereas, in compelling annulment of the decree of separation, the ensuing terrorism achieved at best a pyrrhic victory, it gave Bengalis spectacular opportunities for proving their valour.

That their potential victims considered the terrorists diabolical was not surprising; and when a few years later Gandhi became commander of the national front, he too condemned them unequivocally, not only because his nature abhorred bloodshed, but also because he acknowledged without reservation that no successful revolution could be imposed from above. Thus the immediate objectives he set before the country never lacked mass appeal; and since the concrete is almost always irrational, those among his contemporaries who had the disadvantage of receiving a liberal education found little sense in the spinning wheel, or even the salt march of 1936, regarded as a weapon against the British Empire. All the same they realized soon enough that the non-violent non-cooperation of Gandhi asked of the best no less courage than terrorism had required; and by then most anarchists knew beyond the possibility of doubt that the very logic of their irresistible, inexorable demand for the reunification of Bengal had lost the province large areas inhabited by non-Bengali minorities, while the Hindus and the Muslims remaining within the new boundaries had become so nearly equal in number that the balance of power seemed forever vested in the alien rulers of the land. Nor had the mischief stopped there: the capital had been removed to Delhi; and given to understand that this would end the Bengali monopoly of Indian politics, the rest of the country had approved, or at any rate acquiesced.

As to the constitutionalists, few among them possessed Gokhale's integrity; and so, when Minto and Morley announced their nominal reforms to soften the shock of the accompanying partition, many were seduced by the unimportant offices for which loyal Indians could henceforth compete. Some of these place-hunters had been and remained good friends of my mother's family; and the constant refusal of the latter to follow their example owed nothing to the frustrations of men who

mistake the shadow for the substance of power. Neither my mother's father nor her uncles Manmatha and Hem had ever harboured such illusion: accustomed to regard themselves as dispensers of patronage, they had not only scorned to seek preferment but borne with supreme indifference the official displeasure that had been visited on them since the eighties of the last century because at a mammoth meeting, convened to decide on the best memorial for Northbrook, they had urged rejection of the resolution expressing Calcutta's unanimous gratitude to the departing viceroy, despite his open hostility to Indian education; and though the oratory of their spokesman Manmatha had not emboldened the native majority of the audience to vote for the motion, seven others had joined their walk-out from the speechless Town Hall. They had therefore been called the Ten Immortals in the nationalist newspapers of the next morning; and if the ludicrous epithet had shown up the paucity of stirring incidents in a Bengali's life, their public protest had no earlier parallel.

Only the obvious goodwill of Ripon had for a while broken through their insulating reserve; and whereas they had not shared the great expectations that the initiation of local self-government had aroused among the educated classes in India, Probodh and Manmatha had nevertheless let admirers persuade them to stand for election to the first municipal council set up for the city of Calcutta under the stultifying chairmanship of a foreign official. Their constituencies had almost wholly voted for them; but denied scope to prove their capacity for public service, they had soon tired of the mummery; and when the growing hostility of the British in India to Ripon's mild liberalism had hardened into open opposition, their half-hearted cooperation with the faithless bureaucracy had been finally withdrawn. Among their fellows, of course, they had thereby increased in stature; and this in its turn had entitled them to view with indulgent condescension the political illusions of their ambitious friends. Yet, notwithstanding their irresistible charm that continued to earn them the affection of people they tended to patronize, they had given up all hope

of getting their legitimate due through peaceful means; and as Manmatha, especially, had in his formative years learnt to identify freedom with parliamentary democracy, so no sooner had Ripon's viceroyalty ended than he decided to pull up his shallow roots from the barren soil of his native land.

The truth is that after the initial alienation he was never at home in the country of his birth; he remained a patriot to the end, but the facts of Indian life caused him acute discomfort; and however full of contradictions his repeated attempts to effect a theoretical reconciliation of Hindu ideals and Western enlightenment, he could not tolerate the abysmal difference between word and deed even in his own family. He must, for instance, have been distressed by the seclusion of his sister-in-law, to approach whom one left altogether the illuminated part of the house for an el-shaped corridor so constructed as to keep out all direct light, descended a dozen steps of rickety wood to plunge into the chronic darkness of a limitless terrace permanently enclosed in a screen of fixed venetians, and then, crossing another passage similarly shuttered and somewhat more unsteady underfoot, arrived at a long row of low rooms crammed with the refuse of ages past—tarnished idols and broken dolls, threadbare brocade and eviscerated pillows, rusty cases of caked collyrium, faded bushels denuded of their cowrie binding, warped winnowing fans, twisted ladles, dented platters and enormous chests echoing with the confabulation of rats; and since to this very day I recall the abiding horror of that journey and its end, I do not wonder that, a childless widower from his early youth, Manmatha, when he remarried in 1899, chose a woman of French extraction for his second wife.

This led promptly to an open breach between Manmatha and his family; but except during the first years after his return from Cambridge, the two had been drifting apart; and though it was not till the premature death of Probodh, the eldest of the brothers, that Manmatha left the common dwelling to live in a flat of his own, he had even earlier settled into the habit of spending only the cold weather in Calcutta. The rest of the

time he roved the wide world; and if the voluminous record of his wanderings, as published later, makes poor reading to-day, what he saw in the strange lands, which he visited before most other Indians, so dissatisfied him with his own country that his home-comings became a trial for Hem who, because of his elder's frequent absence, had to take on the cares of the household. For Hem could not be called meek by any manner or means; however inferior his formal education compared to Manmatha's, he knew his own mind no less definitely than the latter; and while Hem, comparatively more of a conservative in social matters, inclined to radical politics, Manmatha combined evolutionary politics with a radical approach to social reform. Thus when in the middle of the eighteen-nineties Manmatha decided to reside in England, Hem felt real relief; and yet by then his nationalism had reached such a state of militancy that Manmatha's defection seemed to him an act of betrayal, rendered finally irrevocable by the foreign marriage.

Meanwhile, as much from a sense of solidarity with the people of India as in protest against Manmatha's alienation, Western manners ceased to be *de rigueur* for the male members of the family, the revival of Bengali culture became a consuming passion for Hem, and perhaps to prove where his real allegiance lay his two daughters were married off in their early teens, although, set against my mother's wedding at the age of nine, this marked a measurable progress which also prompted the prohibition of physical intimacy between the young couples while the education of the girls continued under British governesses. Manmatha escaped such devious goings-on by being far away; but until he had children of his own, he remained deeply attached to his nephews and nieces; and since both his withdrawal and Hem's spectacular extravagances originated in the sudden cessation of Probodh's restraining influence, he took the worst possible view of the situation facing Subodh, my mother's only brother and Nirod, Hem's only son. Unaccustomed to mince words, he wrote therefore strong letters urging the need of removing the boys from the spendthrift atmosphere to the discipline of an English public school; and

offered a sitting target, Hem came back with the smashing retort that he would rather teach his wards how to live recklessly than turn them against their country by wilful denationalization. Thus the great risks run in the past did not after all keep the family united; and soon the two brothers ceased even to correspond.

For all that, Manmatha went on feeling a special responsibility for his older nephew, the fatherless Subodh; and his letters never tired of advising the latter to join him in England so as to proceed to Cambridge despite the perverse objection of Hem. Subodh obeyed the call in the end by running away from home; and if my mother did not exaggerate when years later she used to tell me that Hem's grief on the occasion exceeded that of a parent whose favourite child had died suddenly, then there was something certainly wrong with the mentality of her younger uncle. For by that time the nineteenth century had almost spent itself; and, in the decades which intervened Manmatha's going to Christ College and Subodh's entering Trinity, hundreds of Indian boys had on their return from British universities found welcome in the bosom of their orthodox families. Subodh on the other hand belonged to a household notoriously anglicized; although he just spoke his mother-tongue, he could not write it at all; and since his self-exiled uncle had not yet even thought of marrying a foreigner, he would set no bad example, but find ethical guidance of the best kind, lacking which young men of his age became victims of predatory females in a strange land. The contrived irony of history must therefore underlie Hem's unbrotherly behaviour; and perhaps history repeating itself supplied Uncle Subodh with the unanswerable arguments he used to dissuade my father from sending me to an English public school in 1912.

The resemblance between the families of my father and my mother lay in their compulsory severance from the parent stock; and the shock of the amputation, instead of making the lopped-off branches wither, caused in them such an outburst of creative energy that almost instantly they became flowering trees which for a time at least belied the canker evident in their

original strains. But there the similarity ended; and whereas the Dattas worked reasonably hard to maintain their lucrative connection with British commerce, the Malliks lived in seigneurial idleness on the strength of a legendary ancestor employed as Prime Minister by a Muslim King of the sixteenth century. No wonder my mother's marriage seemed a misalliance to her relations; and perhaps they accepted it only because Manmatha's compromising wanderings had reduced their status in the communal hierarchy without quite costing them their caste. Thus if any tolerance was demanded to bring about this improbable union, the credit must go to my grandfather—a conforming Hindu, devoid of ambition, valuing moderation in all fields and unobtrusively self-reliant; and even so he required superhuman forbearance to avoid initial disaster. For on the day of the wedding the very elements took a hand in spoiling everything; from dawn began a continuous downpour of extraordinary virulence; and when late in the evening, unable to delay any longer, the half-a-mile-long procession obligatory on such occasions for sons of well-to-do fathers got moving towards the bride's house, the water stood waist-deep on the four-mile stretch of intervening streets.

And all the way the drizzle went on, quenching the portable festoons of acetylene flares, dissolving the paper animals and dancing marionettes, drowning the bagpipes, deadening the drums and choking the brass of the innumerable bands, and even turning into a sieve the silken canopy of the pillored platform whereon, occupying a gilded chair, the brocaded bridegroom was carried aloft by sixteen bearers reminiscent of finicky cranes in a flooded field; and though the majority of the wading guests, numbering perhaps a thousand, would have endured anything within reason to spare my grandfather embarrassment, their temper did not improve when, seeing the bedraggled crowd approach haven at last, a member of the bridal party shouted at the top of his insolent voice, 'Here they come, the branded R. B.'s, hungry like a swarm of locusts.' For the initials belonged to my grandfather's Anglo-Greek principals; and used as a trade-mark of the house, the two

letters figured on the millions of pieces of cheap cloth and the hundreds of thousands of cheaper umbrellas the firm sold throughout the length and breadth of India with the help of a few very highly paid European assistants and countless natives mostly on the verge of starvation. Since my grandfather had recruited the latter and continued to control them, they considered him their protector, while he in his turn felt unhappy unless they played their rightful part on occasions like the present; and if ordinarily they behaved with becoming humility, they possessed sense enough to realize that the gibe aimed at them sought really to wound their kindly patron.

In a Bengali wedding every advantage still rests on the side of the bridegroom; and at the time of my mother's marriage nearly seventy-five years ago, daughters seemed such a liability even to an enlightened family that anybody willing to take them away acted like an omnipotent saviour, whose retinue too would claim the right of an army of liberation to the benefactors' subservience. In the circumstances, my grandfather could call the whole thing off at the very last moment; and indeed many an irate parent among his contemporaries had for infinitely slighter offence pulled back their sons from the brink of the altar. What, moreover, rendered the present instance of calculated insult particularly gratuitous was the fact that the hosts already knew from the courteous intimation sent earlier by my grandfather the nature and the number of the guests he proposed to bring that night; and the responsible among the Malliks who, with my mother's father and uncles at their head, rushed forward to repair the damage expected at least to eat large quantities of the humble pie. My grandfather refused however to let them prolong their sincere apologies; instead he turned to his companions to say that, greatly as he appreciated their braving such terrible weather to see his own son wed, he should not allow them to risk pneumonia which they must catch if they stayed to consume the huge dinner prepared to welcome them; and they went—not home, but to dry clothes and a very belated feast hastily improvised under his secret instructions in the house of his chief assistant.

The lesson was not lost on the Malliks; and though I doubt if they admitted even then that they had at last met their match, never again did the two families come anywhere near a clash. The Dattas, of course, remained for a long time junior partners in the new combine; and that happened not only because the other side, recognizing its responsibility for the false start, took the initiative in setting the right course, but also because, when shortly afterwards my grandfather passed away with tragic suddenness, my father, not yet eighteen, and his elder brother, only three years his senior, welcomed guidance from my mother's people. But already at that date persons of real eminence in most circles of indigenous Calcutta, much more advanced both in age and experience, prized their advice and approbation; and the equally unexpected death of Probodh, followed by Manmatha's refusal of involvement in household cares, made Hem's authority trebly potent. For all that, his personality contained no hint of any coercive element; he compelled admiration by something charismatic in his nature; and a spontaneous generosity redeemed his very extravagance, ruinous as it proved in the end. This grace singled him out in an epoch of competitive high-living; and my father, whose capacity for reverence developed early, admired him for it, while his cumulative absorption in the mounting struggle for the emancipation of India became an example to the younger man.

Towards the end of his glorious life Pandit Motilal Nehru, the father of independent India's first prime minister, used to receive a lot of patronizing homage from callow firebrands, because, a confirmed constitutionalist in his heyday, he allowed his all-consuming love for his great son to sweep him into the gathering flood of revolutionary extremism; but he was not alone nor the earliest to suffer such a sea-change: Hem, who, though much older in years, belonged to Motilal's generation and possessed a background of similar opulence, underwent the same transformation some time around the turn of the century; and in his case no factor even remotely personal supplied the motive power. Moreover, his break with moderate

politics meant probably a greater wrench: a close associate of his friend W. C. Bonnerjee in founding the Indian National Congress, to which he also introduced his intimate Rabindranath Tagore, he had been among the frock-coated regulars sweating on the dais of that petitioning body during its initial sessions; and when after a little while he suddenly found his self-respect outraged by the official contempt poured invariably on the annual resolutions of Indian notables, none of his contemporaries shared his disillusion, whereas the general public, as yet unconditioned to open sedition, could not offer him any compensatory acclaim. Hence his unreserved support of nascent terrorism; and if nevertheless his conspiratorial dreams failed to materialize, blame attached no less to the faults inseparable from the best-laid plans of mice and men than to his quixotic generosity.

This last, coupled with his innate abhorrence of everything furtive, made him notoriously gullible; and he himself used to relate with rueful humour how like a comic character he could behave at times. The classic instance occurred at the height of Curzon's persecution-mania when, imagining that the hostility of an ungrateful world had hemmed him in, he selected the Bengalis for crushing humiliation, conceivably because he feared that, as the proverbial worm capable of turning against his Olympian will, they held the threat of the ultimate indignity; and while Hem conceded readily enough that, however disturbed within, his friends showed wisdom by remaining outwardly impassive under so incessant a provocation, he would not be argued out of his open conviction that national honour demanded immediate liquidation of the rampaging Viceroy. Fortunately he was only impetuous and not foolhardy: he knew that advancing years and failing health, the conspicuous position he occupied in society and his abysmal ignorance of firearms rendered him totally unfit for direct action of any kind; and the resultant despair coming on top of his spiritual isolation may explain at least in part why he accepted without a moment's hesitation the services offered him by a youngish Bengali who stayed back after an evening

of particularly unproductive discussion to ask his host if the only son of poor parents should seek political martyrdom.

The volunteer was a briefless barrister of some years' standing; and he never tired of informing the incurious that, just as racial discrimination had once forced him to spend endless time in London qualifying for admission to the English bar, so now lack of right connections prevented his professional success. To him of course a hard life appeared much preferable to prosperity acquired by flattering toadies on the one hand and welcoming kicks from bullies on the other; and he wanted Hem to confirm that, although his conscience continued to trouble him unduly for his helpless role in the impoverishment of a doting father, he would not be transgressing the moral law if he placed duty to his country above filial piety. But what followed astonished Hem even more than the unprecedented absence from the foregoing of all reference to the lost paradise across the pathless waters which perhaps necessarily induced Anglo-Bengali phantasy to overlook the difference between easy women and duchesses, between inexpensive beer and champagne; and equally unexpectedly his visitor showed real embarrassment when told that, however difficult it might seem to fix ethical priorities, no financial problem existed in the present case, since a dedicated patriot could always leave dependents to the safekeeping of his grateful motherland.

The strange man would not accept the proffered compliment; and he gave it out as his considered opinion that a national hero was much more than a crack shot who wanted to employ his paltry proficiency in eliminating the country's enemies. Nevertheless he offered to demonstrate this skill picked up during the idle years of an irksome exile; and though Hem tried out the claim a few days later, he decided there and then to prevail upon his guest to agree to a gift of Rs. 20,000, so that the old people at home might not be left utterly destitute when the time came for their son to finish Curzon off. The sum needs multiplying at least twenty times for conversion into today's currency; and if even so Hem considered the amount too small, he felt his power of persuasion exhausted in getting a figure

named at all. Nor did he succeed in clinching the bargain that very night; and while he ended by making the other party admit that in the special circumstances of the case payment could not await completion of the contract, he himself had at the same time to concede that, in order to prevent accumulation of direct evidence, not only must no cheque change hands but disbursement of the corresponding cash ought also to take place just a week before the crucial date some three months hence when the Viceroy should be approachable at a function for which a member of the English bar could obtain an invitation.

Not that Hem intended to save himself and send his accomplice to the gallows: on the contrary he planned to make a voluntary confession as soon as the other man faced trial; and then, provided he got his way, the proceedings would close with a joint statement from the defendants, setting out their motives and analysing the moral and political implications of their desperate deed. Meanwhile he felt supremely happy and so free that the prospect of his own death by hanging could no more compel his choice than could the blandishments of gracious living; and indeed, looking back, he found his sense of fulfilment well justified. For after all he had put his advantages to the best use, liberated his mind from ancient shackles, set society many a good example, earned the love and respect of almost every distinguished Indian; and now, cancelling the futility of talk and make-belief, the Motherland called him to do his quixotic best in the coming struggle for vindication of her honour. At any rate it never entered his head that murder differed from assassination only in name; and even if he possessed insufficient Sanskrit to hold, on the authority of the Gita, that man sinned not by killing but by refusing to kill when disinterested duty enjoined such action, his passionate hatred of Curzon was completely devoid of personal considerations.

He abominated that pompous Proconsul because he loved the liberal philosophy of British thinkers from Locke to John Stuart Mill, because he recognized that, at least as an incidental result of British rule, India was slowly ridding herself of the

dead weight of Hindu degeneracy, and even more because he remained convinced that, given the chance, the indigenous way of life, with the emphasis on ascetic virtues and eternal verities, could not only absorb the worldly graces and rational disciplines of the West but in the process of accepting new values become also a higher culture than any in existence then; and just before he began to wish that a terrible example be made of Curzon in order to deter lesser and later enemies of the entelechy from preventing its emergence, he led a long cortège of Indian notables who, clad in customary white, walked barefoot the whole length of Calcutta to mourn the death of Queen Victoria. For in Hem's view she stood for the messianic aspect of British imperialism; and once he had discharged his debt of gratitude by paying public homage to her memory, he felt free to confront the forces of evil inherent in the system. To his own generation, however, the dark side of the medal seemed almost non-existent, whereas his juniors, like my father, would not dwell on the brighter face from fear of debilitating their single-minded opposition to the other; and so he took nobody into his confidence, nor checked on the antecedents and bona fides of his fellow-conspirator.

Instead, the latter proposed to give the impression of being an unthinking loyalist of the irrespressible kind, who, when sober, decried everything native and, if primed with alcohol, imitated British vices to perfection; and much as Hem disliked prevarication, he consented to the tactics of concealment, because premature disclosure would have ruined not only his particular plot but also its chain-reaction in the immediate future. Moreover, he did not want to entangle his friends and family in the consequences of his folly; and while he thought that his unscrupulous silence should enable them to stand up to the most searching cross-examination, he provided additional safety by sending Nirod, his constitutionally nervous son, right out of the country. Fortunately Subodh, his headstrong nephew, was already immured in Cambridge through Manmatha's providential wiles; and though considerations of face prevented Hem from getting his son too admitted to

Trinity, he sought the help of his globe-trotting brother's powerful friends in Japan to find a temporary refuge for Nirod in that country. The elaborate precautions proved, alas, quite unnecessary: a week before the due date, Hem's accomplice, seemingly somewhat worse for drink, stayed back after a late party to receive the stipulated sum of Rs. 20,000 in notes of small denominations; next day, in keeping with the preliminary terms of the agreement, he went underground, not however to reappear at the appointed place; and Curzon survived to weep over the failure of the Conservatives to elect him Prime Minister.

1957

Calcutta

Among my more fabulous friends is an infuriating philosopher who used to claim that the only way of knowing a place was never to visit it. He is the most single-minded person I have yet encountered; and his paradoxes are the natural product of a speculative intellect that would compose the differences of the real and the negative in related multiplicity. Or such is my guess after looking at the titles of the formidable books he has published since he deserted his native Bengal to return to Oxford; and though that is as far as I have gone in understanding his basic ideas, I now admit the converse of his proposition. For I belong to a family which had lived where Fort William was built after the Battle of Plassey; and removed thence to the centre of the town, it has remained rooted to Calcutta ever since. But I who was born here at the turn of the century, and have spent most of my years in the city, cannot define its character; and when a newcomer asks me what he should see, I am struck dumb.

I see no connection between such failure on my part and the fact that Calcutta is an upstart hardly two centuries old, whereas the rest of India measures antiquity by millennia. At any rate, cities in other parts of the world can be young and attractive at the same time; and even in this immemorial land the populous sections of every town are seldom more ancient than the first capital of the British Raj. Besides, if Calcutta lacks archaeological sites, it can boast of lanes as dingy and buildings as mouldy as those of Muttra, Delhi, and Benares, to mention only three out of perhaps a hundred names; and the east has the advantage over the north in possessing a truly disintegrating climate that generates ruins in record time. This the Bengalis seem to have realized early in their history; and so until, say, two hundred years ago most of them not only lived in mud houses with thatched roofs, but likewise worshipped clay

images which, once their day was done, went back to rest in the beds of super-abundant rivers and ubiquitous marshes.

But until the 18th century the sacred Ganges considered the Hooghly her principal outlet into the sea; and consequently, on both banks of the latter, urban communities pullulated right down to seven or eight miles north of what is now Calcutta. Beyond stretched mangrove swamps dotted with obscure villages; and because the English who had already obtained a foothold farther upstream found themselves in constant difficulty with either the ruling power or their European rivals, they moved down to three of the larger fishing settlements. Thus in the 17th century was born the second city of the British Empire; and if its infancy passed amidst peril and pestilence, its nurses could find resignation in the thought that it was obviously under the influence of Siva's blood-thirsty consort whose shrine at adjacent Kalighat had been drawing pilgrims from at least the 15th century. It is conceivable that Calcutta does not owe its name to that destructive goddess; but I, for one, am convinced that she alone is responsible for its initial indifference to the past and subsequent avidity for the future.

In other words, however haphazard the preliminary choice, no site could be more appropriate for founding an exotic empire; and though Calcutta's indigenous residents were first attracted to it because it was a haven of security in a sea of anarchy, they stayed on for the sake of the new horizons they could glimpse from there. So long as they remained on foreign territory, they were free from traditional restraints; and the voluntary exile filled their pockets with easy money, as it stuffed their heads with strange ideas. In time the last became the most lasting of Britain's gifts to India; and for years Calcutta was their distributing centre. But, to start with, nobody felt rooted here: those who profited by the city's commerce bought estates elsewhere; and even after absentee landlords had ceased to be exceptions to the rule, they considered themselves less as members of a coherent community than as opportunists

competing with others of their kind. The result did not conduce to the growth of economic classes; but it reduced the importance of caste by making the family the hub of all activity.

Meanwhile the fashion of living in storeyed houses of brick and mortar had caught on; and even the would-be rich had to build mansions which their descendants could pretend to own so long as they could keep usurers at bay by promises or litigation. Thus arose the self-styled city of palaces; but it was altogether devoid of planning and civic conscience. Perhaps the pattern was set by the surrounding marshes with their solid protuberances; and stately homes soared over agglutinations of unspeakable hovels. Through them meandered lanes that changed from dunghill to cesspool during the monsoon; and though by the time I was a small boy they had been replaced by metalled roads in the better quarters, yet once, after a particularly heavy downpour, half the main streets remained under water for a whole week. Nor was any architectural sense discernible in individual buildings; and if the pillared residences of the Europeans were spaciously colonial, the public edifices were uniformly hideous. The Government House, the Museum, and perhaps the Victoria Memorial are exceptional; but the mock-Gothic High Court must be seen to be believed.

The corresponding achievement of the private sector is a Scottish castle constructed by a great patron of Indian culture; and since the most pungent of Calcutta's fish and vegetable markets had to be crossed to reach it, the juxtaposition is nightmarish enough to belong to the city of dreadful night. Other instances of bad taste were only a little less eccentric; and the rich Bengali could almost never conceive of a house in which Ionic supports and cast-iron balustrades did not go together. Walled grounds cut some of the palaces off from outside squalor; and within were lawns and flower-beds and ornamental waters, greek-style vases and rococo fountains and nudes of imitation marble, all focused around sprawling structures containing several courtyards, many halls overflowing with chandelier, console furniture, and mirror; and countless

small rooms where men and women led their separate lives, only to come together at night to produce yet more life. Among the less wealthy the garden was reduced to potted palms, only two courtyards had to suffice, and while bedrooms were numerous, public rooms were few and fly-blown.

Facing the principal court stood a single-storeyed pavilion; and the number of its arches, as also of its inner compartments, was a fair index to its owner's pretensions. In it took place the religious festivals; and these were said to be at least thirteen in twelve months. The foremost among them occurred after the rains; and for four days a benign manifestation of Kali was worshipped under the name of Durga. On the tenth day of the full moon the ten-armed image was consigned to the river; and for the rest of the evening everybody had to embrace everybody else. The only other occasion when barriers were customarily lowered was Holi—a spring feast unashamedly erotic in content; and then not only did the streets turn into a riot of colour, but even homes suffered invasion from Bacchanalian crowds. At all other times people kept to their particular orbits; and respectable women were never admitted to them. There was, however, no dearth of nautch girls; and while they danced and sang in the great halls, the head of the house sat about with his friends and hangers-on drinking champagne or sipping brandy.

Less intimate, if more ostentatious, parties were occasionally graced by the family's British patrons; but though on arrival they were obsequiously received, their segregation was soon contrived; and for an hour or two the condescending untouchables remained on exhibition, draining Gargantuan tumblers and nibbling Indian sweets. A wider circle was invited to the musical soirées, operatic performances, and readings from the epics and religious classics, which took place in the big courtyard; and for the frequent weddings of sons and daughters, nephews and nieces, every court and corridor and terrace had to be given over to banqueting, as no acquaintance could be excluded from the list of guests. But before the European stage

could be adapted to Bengali conditions, Calcutta knew no public entertainment or, for the matter of that, public life. Bengalis did not frequent clubs; food taboos prevented the growth of restaurants; and drinking was a sin that could be indulged in apparent secrecy. So until organized sports, like racing, football, and cricket, in that order, began to draw crowds of fifteen to twenty thousand, Calcutta's only communal amusement was public meetings.

The Bengali's love of grandiloquence is coupled with vehemence in argument; and though the first public gatherings were convened to voice the well-recognized need for social and religious reform, the resultant debates emphasized, instead of mitigating, the factionalism inherent in the life of Calcutta. If, nevertheless, the native society did not soon reach maximum entropy, the reason was the increasing weight of the 'White Man's Burden'. A handful of strangers in a teeming land, the city's rulers could not help suffering from some agoraphobia; but after they had managed to survive the Mutiny, their aloofness turned to arrogance of surprising blatancy. In that touch-and-go affair the Bengali had been whole-heartedly on their side; and he did not agree that insolence should be his reward at its conclusion. Even so he was prepared to make allowances for an alien's poorer nerves; and it was only when Ripon's proposal to let Indian magistrates try European criminals had almost unleashed a British mutiny that he grew too indignant to remember his differences with his countrymen.

In their treatment of one another more snobbish than he was in his daily life, the foreigners presented to him a serried front more solid than the walls of his ancestral house. Whatever his station, he could not visit their homes except as a suppliant carrying propitiatory gifts; if business demanded his attendance at their clubs, he could only enter by the servants' door; he was not allowed to stray into the part reserved for them in the best public park; and to eat in their restaurants he had to borrow their clothes, or be thrown out. Macaulay had, of course, considered him indispensable to the administration;

and to teach him a modicum of English his own system of education had been deliberately suppressed. But because his proficiency had exceeded his mentors' intention, he could be called a Babu by even his near-illiterate superiors, provided they possessed a paler skin; and as a sedulous ape mouthing polysyllabic words whose meaning presumably eluded him, he was denied admission into the ranks of the Indian Army.

No wonder that before the last century was over, political agitation had become the vocation of most able Bengalis; and for this some credit must go to the Bengali law of inheritance which, by insisting that all assets of a deceased father be equally divided among his sons, prevents concentration of wealth for more than three generations. The old families were therefore declining fast; and a new prestige was beginning to attach to professional men who rose in the world without any obvious favour from the British. The majority of them were in legal practice, though numerically doctors came next; and quite a few edited newspapers which carried great influence. They realized that their success depended on their personal qualities and not on family connections; and inevitably they were loyal to their professions. Many of them had, moreover, learnt their trade abroad; and if, incidentally, they had returned with esoteric affectations that provoked the uninitiated to rude laughter, they received, at the same time, homage as national heroes because they claimed absolute equality with the European.

The savagery of Kipling's repetitive satire proves how furiously he and his community hated the Anglo-Bengalis; and there is no denying that at times they were quite insufferable. Even after years of eminence in their professions they spent their leisure recounting their juvenile pranks at Oxford or Cambridge, London or Edinburgh; and if they objected to being termed 'wogs', their only exclusive club was open to oriental gentlemen who were too obviously Westernized. Yet when a British Chief Justice wanted to show his liberalism by asking to be a member of the institution, he was promptly told that he could join as soon as a leading Bengali barrister was

admitted to the Bengal Club; and though, more British than the British in their immaculate frock-coats, the patriots worded their annual resolutions in mellifluous English, they demanded self-government for the whole of India. For by then they had counterparts everywhere in the country; and behind those figures, often distorted by the twilight, were ranged so many educated Indians that Curzon himself, for all his Olympian haughtiness, was shaken to the core.

Otherwise he would not have misused his position as Chancellor of the University of Calcutta to attack the Bengali character; and at least a decade earlier British officials had learnt to equate the Hindu intellectual with the scum of the earth. Its salt was, of course, the rural Jath and the retrograde Pathan, who, being Muslims, had hitherto been openly discriminated against as former rulers of India; and since one of the declared aims of the Mutiny had been restoration of the Mughal *imperium*, the uprising made their situation worse. They too, on their side, had so resented the rise of the new order that they had shut their eyes to its merits; and in keeping with their isolation their religion had turned revivalist. But, now suddenly, the Civil Service discovered their old-world charm; and though their qualities were supposed to derive from their avoidance of modern education, even those among them who had been seduced by the example of the Hindus were somehow given the benefit of the doubt.

In the meantime Hindu reformers, whether mystic or rationalist, had been denouncing bigotry; and because by a natural transition they began to dream of an Indian nation, Curzon's successor forgot himself so far as to put down in black and white that the British Raj must follow a policy of divide and rule. Fortunately the Calcutta Mohammedans were a small minority—mostly petty traders with a sprinkling of decrepit aristocrats who lived on partible pensions which grew tinier and tinier from generation to generation. So while the indefatigable Mr Beck continued his work at Aligarh as the nurseryman of Islamic intransigence, pending its transplantation throughout

India, Bengal was partitioned to give the Muslims the status of a majority in a region where they were undoubtedly subject to Hindu exploitation. But, to start with, the earnest failed to clinch any contract; and if few Muslims shared the exaltation of the Hindu terrorists, both exulted equally when, as the outcome of the latter's deeds of dramatic violence, the so-called settled fact was unsettled, and the province became again one.

The 'sun-dried bureaucrats', as they were popularly named, hated the humiliation; and to show their resentment they shifted the capital of the Indian Empire from Calcutta to Delhi. Or so at least the Bengali thought; and while the Northerner's approval of the move seemed to him lying propaganda designed to hide the same diabolical policy of divide and rule, he was quick to remember an old saying that no throne set up in Delhi would stand for long. Recent events have certainly confirmed the prophecy if it can be so described; and yet in 1911 the dissolution of the British Raj was but a patriot's dream, whereas the emergence of Pakistan was a nightmare which even the worst pessimist could never have invented. For all that, Calcutta's equilibrium was rendered unstable; and though the city continued to grow as the centre of the country's commerce and the largest port in Asia, the territories it directly fed upon were reduced to less than half by the new boundaries of reunited Bengal.

Undoubtedly the old province had been too big for efficient administration; and the separation of some regions could now be justified on the ground that if what is culturally one may not be disrupted, then tracts which are linguistically different must also receive their due. But those who were thus hoist with their own petard continued to believe that large areas were taken out of Bengal so as to make Hindus and Muslims equal rivals for British favours; and the fact remains that the rift between the two communities widened as the years passed. At any rate, religious riots became specific to Calcutta soon after the First World War; and their climax was reached in August 1946 when history came full circle and Pax Britannica,

together with the empire which was supposed to be founded on it, ended ignominiously in the very city where it had been born in such glory hardly two hundred years before. With it disappeared the unity of India that was considered the greatest achievement of the British rule; and perhaps the special destiny of Calcutta was thus fulfilled.

Formal independence came a year later; and what happened in the Punjab immediately thereafter rightly overshadowed the Great Calcutta Killing, as the local carnage was rather infelicitously named by the newspaper I worked on at the time. All the same, our orgy of death must receive its due honour as the first of its kind in India's history; and since the number massacred was at least ten thousand, it was a sizeable affair. For three days the corpses lay in the streets of the country's largest city, exposed to the sun and rain until they had become black and bloated and too putrid for even rats and vultures to feed on; and the bodies thrown into the river collected where it bent under the window of a young girl who went raving mad watching the accumulation. Those in possession of their senses kept their doors bolted; and if thus they missed the fine glow imparted to the monsoon sky by houses blazing away at night, nowhere was there any escape from the stench of rotting carcasses.

Death, sudden and violent, was, of course, no stranger to Calcutta; and apart from earlier riots which took their regular, if smaller, toll, Japanese planes killed nearly a thousand dock-workers in the one and only daylight raid on the defenceless city. There was also the 1943 famine; and at its height as many as two thousand dead and dying were picked up daily from the indifferent streets. But callousness, inefficiency, or complacence did not explain the Manichaean outburst of 1946; and those who participated in the mass murders were literally without number, and came from all classes of Indian society. In any case, when at last, through the good offices of an English friend, I could visit my mother, the first thing I heard was how a neighbour of hers, an alumnus of a British university, had

incited a mob to finish off a dozen Muslim hawkers whose decomposing remains I had passed to reach my mother's house; and so, on returning home that day, I destroyed the draft of a booklet I had contracted to write, proving that my countrymen, as a whole, were allergic to physical violence.

Full twelve months had to pass before all the city streets were again safe for every denomination; and if their comparative tranquillity in subsequent years derived largely from the withdrawal of the British, the creation of Pakistan, and the resultant slump in the stocks of communal militancy, the real miracle of Calcutta was wrought by one indomitable man who, more than any other, had brought about the first, disregarded the second, and threw his life away in passive resistance to the third. When it became clear that he had failed to persuade India to remain one, Gandhi decided to return to East Bengal where he had spent many months, trying to end the state of anarchy that had developed there soon after the Calcutta Killing, and from the same cause. But on his way back he found Calcutta in the throes of yet another religious riot; and he could not very well refuse the request of the Muslim head of the local government to stay here for at least a few days to control the Hindu rowdies.

He started unpromisingly enough; his first prayer meetings were attended by hecklers; and the climax came when a violent mob surrounded Gandhi's house demanding that he deliver to them Mr Suhrawardy, the execrated Chief Minister. But Gandhi offered himself to the crowd; and though high praise is certainly due to Mr Suhrawardy's courage in joining him not long afterwards, he had by then won the day. Thus on the night of independence a little later, the same streets that had borne the burden of so many dead a year before filled magically with a multitude of celebrants; and while Gandhi, all by himself, mourned the end of Indian unity, Hindus and Muslims indulged in spontaneous fraternization. The sight was as unforgettable as the earlier terror; and if it reinforced the moral that the Bengali is volatile, it disturbed me more as showing how his constructive capacity had declined. Nor did

the balance-sheet improve on a non-parochial view; and even after admitting that the Gujarati saviour was the greatest of his country's sons since Akbar, the fact remained that the scapegoat was the last and the least of British Governors.

Gokhale, Gandhi's political guru, used to say that what Bengal thinks today, the rest of India will think tomorrow. But that was when Calcutta was the capital of the Empire; and since the seat of the central power was moved to Delhi, the Bengali has lived withdrawn into himself, bitterly resenting the unwillingness of others to take him at his own valuation. The ghosts of Calcutta's past citizens, like Surendra Nath Banerjea and Chitta Ranjan Das, continue to haunt his waking hours; and unable to repeat their performance as national figures universally acknowledged as such, he refuses to change the mentality he developed as the leader of the permanent opposition in the heyday of British rule. The civic commotions of which he has been a witness or participant in the intervening years have also left their traumatic mark; and with or without just cause he is ready to join violent demonstrations that fail in their undefined object only because authority has learnt to be tactful and to provide, once or twice a year, a few tramcars to burn.

For all that, he is essentially ungregarious; and at least in 1946, and for quite a while later, Calcutta was as fragmented as it had been at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. By the time of independence the old families had, of course, gone for ever; and even the great houses built by men successful in the learned professions were in decay. Yet the 'new poor' are no less fanatically loyal to the quarter they inhabit than were their ancestors; and except when they congregate to fight for their chosen side during the football season, or to applaud any demagogue in all seasons of the year, they split into small groups which collect every evening in the roomiest house of the neighbourhood. The old and the young naturally keep apart; and women are almost never present. But the talk is incessant; many cups of milky tea with large

quantities of sugar are drunk; and the meeting breaks up only after all reputations outside the circle have been reduced to tatters.

The more sophisticated gather in clubs where the syrupy tea is replaced by weak whiskies; and occasionally there are 'ladies' nights' with interludes of inept dancing. Otherwise the pattern of amusement is much the same; and even at cocktail parties that tend to become the one social event universally repeated in the life of the rich, the same faces smile at the same gossip. But, given time, the observant is bound to notice defections; and he needs only to be comparatively non-attached to discover that the absentees are busy creating their own cliques. Indeed this fissiparous tendency is ubiquitous in Calcutta; and whether it be a school or a college committee, the board of directors of a bank or an insurance company, the presidium of a learned society or an academy of art, would-be dictators are ever faced with potential insurrectionists. Coteries form and dissolve in the literary world as everywhere else; and no Bengali writer, apart from Tagore in his last fifteen years, has yet been able to exist without the plaudits of his own camp and the sneers of opposing factions.

The one good point of all this is that it makes for individuality, with the concommittance of a lively mind and a boundless curiosity; and once things at hand seem unworthy of admiration, there is enchantment in the distance. Thus even if the Bengali intellectual of today reads fewer foreign books than, say, his Bombay counterpart, he reads with more passion and penetration; and when he speaks of his own literature he speaks of technical experiments, of use and abuse of language, rather than of ennobling themes whereby contemporary Hindi writers claim to judge one another's work. At least one quality of his forefathers has not deserted him: he loves disputations; and years ago, on his return to Calcutta, a friend of mine who had witnessed the beginning of the Russian Revolution, and did not escape until 1921, used to repeat that Bengalis were exactly like Russians. A French resident, on the other hand, never tired

of maintaining that this city reminded her of Paris; and a discriminating American once told me that only after reaching Calcutta did he feel that he was in India.

The similarities, if at all real, do not obviously reside in the landscape, architecture, or weather, although the last is, in general, hardly worse than that of Washington; and the 'atmosphere' of Calcutta must be allowed to seep slowly in before the eyesores can be disregarded. In 1911, when a start was made with modernizing the town, the population envisaged was two millions at the end of time; and already between four to five millions sleep here, while another million come to work for the day. Consequently, as the city has crept southwards, turning localities once inhabited by the Nabobs into swarming slums, the living-space available per head has shrunk to be the smallest in the world; and yet prospects of improvement are dim, because rent control and an adequate building programme accord ill, whereas nothing regulates the flow of newcomers from all directions. Calcutta is specifically Bengali; but nearly thirty-five per cent of its residents are foreign, including ten thousand Europeans; and even among the rest only twenty per cent belong to families which may be described as 'cockney' at least metaphorically.

In any case, Calcutta resembles London in the proportion of its population to the total population of West Bengal. About a fifth of the people live in this metropolis; and since the creation of East Pakistan, the province has not enough resources to support such a monstrosity. The Hooghly too is dying; except in the rainy season, it is a tidal reach which cannot expel the silt it receives at high water; and perhaps one day Calcutta will revert to the malarial swamp it once was. Meanwhile it attracts all and sundry; and that not only because it is the one real city in Eastern India, but also because its inhabitants, notwithstanding native peculiarities, are so individuated that strangers are at home in their midst. Most foreigners do not, of course, cease cursing the climate, and complaining exaggeratedly of the filthy streets; and they blame their lack of company on the Bengali's clannishness. But they

spend their lives here without learning a word of the local language; they keep to circles narrower than the endemic ones; and after having been here awhile, they want to stay on.

As for the tourist in a hurry, Calcutta has nothing to offer except its explosive vitality; and even this contrasts incongruously with the leisurely self-indulgence of the sacred bulls who sit ruminating in the middle of the busiest streets, completely disrupting the traffic, and desolating the man already late for his appointment. Nevertheless the thronged bazaars are an everlasting testimony to its irrepressible energy; and the largest of them—the New Market—is, as a whole, perhaps the biggest emporium in the world, although individual shops with their separate owners may sometimes be no more than a small booth or kiosk. The nearest approach to it, in my limited experience, was the Old Market in Istanbul if that be its name, and some of the North African *souks* must also belong to the same genus. But undulled by long familiarity as my response to the latter was, I did not find them as exciting as the New Market; and before import control was extended to include even consumer goods, almost everything produced anywhere in the world could be bought there.

Restriction of foreign exchange has likewise forced out of business the big departmental stores owned by British companies; and high taxation, coupled with the rising cost of living, has so reduced the clientele that smaller bars and chop-houses, especially those which sprang up during the war, have closed down. The foreign clubs are also in difficulty, because their members no longer spend money on the old scale; and though European meals of good quality can still be had at a reasonable price in the bigger restaurants, drinking is a costly luxury. The Calcutta hotels have always been unattractive; and in four or five cabarets dated stars continue to create an illusion of provincial Europe. The Chinese restaurants have generally declined; and the Indian ones, apart from providing hot curries, give a poor account of the country's food which, as in England, is best only in private homes. But the winter racing is still exciting;

the tennis tournaments reach a high standard; and if the Eden Gardens now sprout the shoddiest fairs, the great Maidan persists in spite of excrescences and encroachments.

Calcutta's environs are quite dreary. Barrackpore used to be a fine cantonment, as military stations are named in India; and the park with its old trees was worth an afternoon. But the war ruined it; and the still magnificent Botanical Gardens on the other side of the river cannot be approached except through dreadful streets, now that the ferry does not run regularly. Chandernagore, also across the Hooghly, was until lately a French possession full of a faded and yet exotic flavour. However, since what may be termed its integration, even the Gallic esplanade has lost its nostalgic quality; and the road, though the only arterial one in Bengal, is merely overcrowded and tortuous up to Chandernagore. The other historical highway leading out of Calcutta ends at Jessore in Pakistan; and its avenue of ancient banyans has ceased to allure. Nevertheless, as Jamini Roy loves to say when in his denigrating mood, Calcutta alone can become a village without a moment's ambivalence; and a motorist with time to waste will discover scenes of pleasant rusticity all by himself.

So a short visit to Calcutta need not bore; but those who prolong their stay find in the cinema their chief entertainment; and while Indian films are seldom rewarding, perhaps a third of the better British and American pictures comes here sooner or later. In other words, the pleasures that this city offers are not refined enough for a connoisseur bemoaning his enforced exile; and a dilettante out on a quick discovery of India must begin elsewhere. For, as I said at the outset, Calcutta is devoid of archaeological interest; its upstanding buildings are not even endearingly ugly; the Bengali stage, once its pride, suffers from recurrent depressions; though classical music attracts enormous crowds, its local travesty is so sentimental as to be tiresome; and Bengal never took to Hindu dancing. Mercifully, however, there is Jamini Roy's studio where a great painter can be seen reinterpreting his inheritance in an idiom all his

own; and if his conversation is paid the attention it deserves, more can be learnt about the Indian ethos than from the superb collection of sculpture housed in the Museum.

Calcutta's secret charm must, however, escape the impatient; and only an amateur of history will really love it. For nowhere else in the modern world has a new culture emerged from the deliberate intermingling of two older ones—the peripheral culture of rural Bengal and the cosmopolitan culture of English Whiggery; and to my mind it is the finest legacy of British rule. Initially the hybrid was bound to appear ridiculous; and there is no doubt that its make-up was largely utilitarian. But just as pure altruism often informed the other side, so also the best among us were possessed by intellectual integrity. Or such at least is the impression created in retrospect; and the essence of what was accomplished has not been lost today. Bengali prose, at any rate, originated in the impact of Western ideas on Ram Mohan Roy and his contemporaries; and Michael Madhusudan Datta remodelled Bengali verse as a memorial to English literature. Extending their discoveries, Rabindranath Tagore evolved a seemingly fresh language; and gradually in the last fifty years it has become the speech of every educated Bengali.

All three of them, and scores of others almost equally great, were either born or nurtured in this metropolis; and that is why throughout the present article I have made no distinction between Bengal and Calcutta. Of course, the former existed long before the people who called the latter into being were known in history; and if Alexander the Great did not penetrate far into India, it was because even he feared the famous war elephants of the Gangaridae, to give the Bengalis their Greek name. But during the last two hundred years the capital has so dominated the province as to become one with it; and this is untrue of another city in the country. Hence the dispute about whom Bombay belongs to; and while Maharashtra and Gujarat can conceivably prosper without Bombay, Bengal will die when parted from Calcutta, as indeed will Calcutta separated from Bengal. Conversely, Bombay, deprived of the

Gujaratis, or for that matter of the microscopic Parsi community, may lose its international character; and Calcutta is no less cosmopolitan now that its founders, the British, have abdicated.

1957

Jamini Roy
& the Tradition of Painting in Bengal

The ancients proclaimed that reality was an antinomy; and the cyclic process of history has brought us back to a dialectic which, while it calls itself 'scientific', believes in a mystical union of logical opposites. Yet, even today, the law of identity reigns in solitary splendour throughout the civilized world; and, as we lack the medieval leisure that prompted schoolmen to interminable disputations before ostracizing any unorthodox deduction, so propositions other than tautologies seem to us to be self-contradictory. Thus truth and platitude are now synonymous in our understanding; and the labour-saving devices of over-simplification have become so universally available that, when confronted by the paintings of Jamini Roy with their patently Indian themes and technique, we are startled to hear that the artist began his career as a portraitist in the grand European style. Moreover, such surprise is not always the result of ignorance or innocence; the few competent art critics we have fall into the same popular error; and if they do not know, they invent, if they do know, they distort the details of this man's life, in order to keep intact the monadism of the slothful simpleton.

All this is not, by any means, intended as propaganda, either straight or oblique, in favour of eclecticism. Indeed, it causes me such horror that rather than admit, after the best authorities, that Indian art was the matchless synthesis of Greek, Chinese and Persian influences, I would deny the word 'art' to our buildings, statues and frescoes and call them, instead, 'artifacts', like the plough and the wheel which, though similarly shaped everywhere, were, in all probability, spontaneously evolved in different autochthonous regions. At any rate, I see no reason for accepting that the conception of painting as

a two-dimensional activity came or returned to India by way of China and that perspective was the legacy of the fabulous Iran. On the contrary, the fact that, except at Ellora, our sculpture is seldom in the round and always an aspect of architecture, and, this notwithstanding, the high reliefs at, let us say, Mahaballipuram give one the impression of being completely detached from the architectural background, leads to the certain conclusion that a sense of integrated design does not preclude the knowledge of perspective, and that both these faculties must have been simultaneously exercised since prehistoric times for them to have been so successfully utilized in such early specimens of sculpture as the Bharut railings.

Nevertheless, cultures, like individuals, are distinguishable one from another; and even if it be true that the sum-total of human inventions is, more or less, the same in every age and climate, yet their coherence differs from place to place, all potentialities being fully realized nowhere. Thus the Maya civilization discovered the arch only to discard it, because their architectural inspiration could be turned to better account without that encumbrance; and the Hindu, while he early acquired the elements of perspective, did not, for reasons of his own, develop it to the point where Leonardo later left it. Already, in the Vedic times, he had become intimate with geometrical patterns in the shaping of his complicated altars which, when they fell into disuse through the natural evolution of his religion, disappeared from his spiritual universe, but only after bequeathing their symbolic character on geometry itself. His outlook on life had always been transcendental; and, whether he generally lived up to his ideal or not, it did not take him long to forget that symbols were valuable in so far as they remained substitutes. Or it may be that his society was more of a piece than ours is today; and so closely knit was the group of which he formed an essential part that the most tenuous of abstractions was no bar to communication, since the world had not yet divided itself into the public and the private. An upright stone set on a horizontal one had then the same emotional significance for all; and the recitation of the great epics

in the court of a mighty king moved his humblest subjects to equally sincere tears.

Such a society is bound to discourage vain virtuosity sooner or later, and it is certain to liberate itself from empiricism to turn speculative; its art, in consequence, should cease to be representational and become expressive: its pre-occupation ought gradually to shift from technique to form. For technique, in a narrow sense, is the adjunct to social disruption that forces the discreet artist to imitate the world of senses so perfectly as to make communication independent of conventions, whereas form presupposes a high degree of noetic agreement between complementary individuals who can, therefore, convey their intentions, from one to another, without the mediation of feeling or physiological laws, implied in the creation of resemblances. In other words, although art is esoteric everywhere, in a cohesive community it is an indispensable occupation and not an amusing luxury nor a kind of anti-social self-sufficiency; and even if in this surrounding all men are not artists, yet, art here being a necessary part of an organic system, everyone is enjoined to acquire an insight into its aspects and aims. Thus it came about that in our towns and villages every little girl had to learn drawing, not because she was expected later on to make a living as a designer, but because at our numerous feasts and festivals the floors of mansions and huts alike had to be covered with appropriate arabesques, sketched in chalk and austerely coloured with vermilion powder, tamarind paste and juice of the bean-leaf and, since these decorations were occasional, universal and compulsory, they were formalized to the extent of becoming almost a craft, so that they could be repeatedly reproduced with the least expenditure of skill and the utmost economy of time.

They did not, however, lose their symbolism thereby; and as everybody participated in the seasonal celebrations inspiring them, so no one had the least difficulty in understanding that an assortment of circular dots with a few big daubs in their centres indicate the palmyra grove which, in its turn, recalled

the month of Bhadra when the palm fruit ripened. The objective reference was always there in the regressive background, a series of precise and perennial images, untrammelled by personal feelings or particular associations; and the painter, therefore, not only disdained to create verisimilitude, thus persuading his spectators to suspend disbelief, but could also pay undivided attention to purely aesthetic considerations that in a disjointed society must be subordinated to the needs of naturalism. He knew he was fashioning vessels which at the right moment would contain the collective emotion, now urging him to work; and so he was free to develop the rhythm of his lines without fear of anatomical canons, he was permitted to forget the exigencies of light and shade and to use colour for the purpose of building up a significant design, he was encouraged to explore the limits of human ingenuity and devise figures with ten heads and a thousand eyes. It was considered enough if the results of his imagination furnished the starting point to any well-established and universal reaction; and thereafter he was at liberty to apply green to a human-seeming face when the proximate red made that colour compulsory.

Similar liberation is never possible for a painter in the naturalistic succession, nor is such discipline ever imposed on him; and while his model always constrains the movement of his hands, yet he seldom ventures beyond space and colour perspective to return with reinforced faith to the 'golden section'. To repeat what I have said before, he is a slave to appearance that, depending on his senses, forces him to undertake researches into the physiological laws underlying them; and reality, based on physical or perhaps gestalt laws, generally escapes him, as it rarely does in the case of his formalist colleague. Now gestalt laws are contingent and not necessary in the sense of being deducible from wider principles; they belong to the category of hypotheses whose validity can be tested solely through repeated application in divergent circumstances; and so the rediscovery of the 'golden section' by the painter of significant forms implies a training much more comprehensive than that of a portraitist who, should he have

genius, can at best alter the normal pose of his sitter to make his picture abnormally arresting, whereas his rival has to devise a pattern into which all phenomena will fit, invent a relation that will hold everything from fact to fiction. It is not, therefore, surprising that an abstract art should begin by mastering the rules of faithful imitation. But such an education presupposes a functioning social system, teleologically disposed rather than vocationally inclined; and, since, unlike their predecessors, the British came to India merely to despoil her and not to find a home here, their cultural indifference, in certain cases even interference, was injurious to our essential unities, with the unavoidable result that the exploited inhabitants, in their panic, forgot the unendemic basis of their ethnic integrity and began emphasizing only such points in their ethos as were obviously parochial.

These preliminary considerations, albeit a trifle too long, are indispensable if one is to understand Jamini Roy's work; and so I have made no attempt either to cut them short or to postpone them, although I have no doubt that they did not burden him when, in his early youth, he felt impelled to take up painting as his profession. On the contrary, by the time he was born, social entropy had proceeded far enough to make inevitable the romantic conception of the lone artist bearing aloft his prenatal perfection; and with the tardy recognition of his painful regeneration, he found himself invested with a growing myth which claimed that he had been initiated into the folk art of Bengal by its elusive votaries amidst rural seclusion whence he had come forth into the scoffing city, a taciturn child of nature bent upon reviving the ancient mysteries. But truth, alas, is not only stranger than fairy stories, it is also infinitely more complex; and in fact, like most men of his age, —Jamini Roy is just fifty-five—he began his life as a conscious heretic, rebelling against the monotony of uninventive and non-spontaneous craftmanship to which all artistic activity in this country had been finally reduced by superannuated customs and degraded patrons. I am certain also that, along

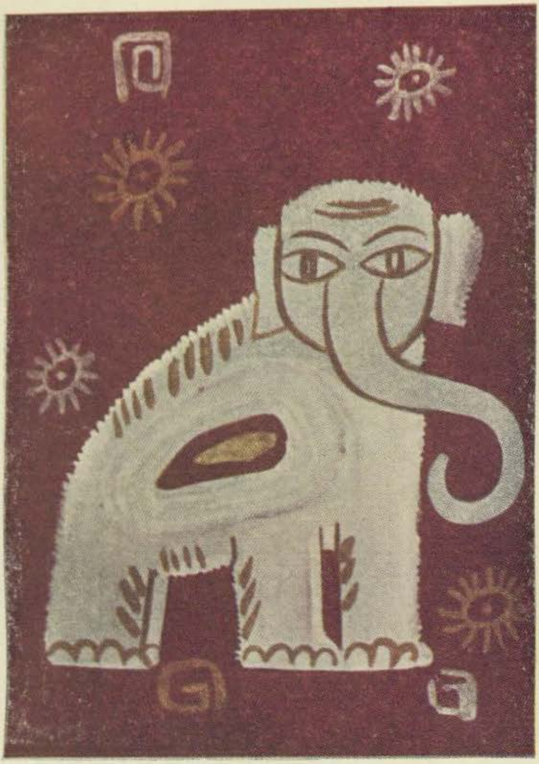
with his contemporaries, he was dazzled by the brilliance of Europe standing on the peak of prosperity, as yet unspotted by the shadow of forthcoming disaster; and, as I half believe that every great artist has in him a trace of the Oedipus complex, I hazard the guess that his father, who resigned a Government post to preach and practise the cult of *Swadeshi* with its faith in the resurrection of the village, had a lot to do with his youthful apostasy.

Moreover, except among a few aboriginal tribes who, living in the fastness of primeval forests, have so far evaded the wiles of our old civilization, there has never been a folk art in this country; and, while the same amount of absorption in intellectual abstractions could hardly be expected of all our artists, those who, quite early in Moghal times, strayed from that ideal were the court painters whom vain princes transformed into commemorators and jaded nobles forced into decorative pornography. The original inspiration was, however, lovingly preserved in our 'popular' art that already several centuries before had, under the guidance of Buddhist humanism, turned secular, but never quite forgotten, though there was yet no Degas to enunciate the proposition, that form should not be confused with drawing which at best is a way of apprehending the former. This is a distinction never understood by folk art which, in general, is too indiscriminating to be able to distinguish between vision and design; and, because form resides only in objects and is not seen except in conjunction with them, the vague contour of objects, viewed, owing to the backwardness of folk science, from a great distance, is stylized in a bold, unbroken outline by the folk artists who fondly believe that thereby they are going to hold form captive for ever.

This transposition of categories is not at all uncommon in primitive cultures; and students of comparative anthropology have long known that astrology early became the chief concern of the human race, due simply to the fact that, since seasonal changes could really be predicted with the help of the stars, it was natural to imbue the stars with the physical property of causing all change. In our 'popular' art so strict a logic had,

however, no place. Years of disaster and disappointment had already robbed us of our certitude when we started to model and to paint; and, by the time we passed beyond colouring vases and stringing beads, the painful confession was extorted from us that the visible object had no flowing outline, its neighbours, impinging on it, destroyed the contour and the interruption was aggravated if we did not consider the object piecemeal but submitted it to a comprehensive or simultaneous vision. It was then seen that out of the hazy half-tone only the points of maximum contrast met the eye, splitting the integral object into a congeries of interrelated masses and surfaces in which light was as important as shadow and void more interesting than substance: and it made no difference whether one was naturalistically inclined or not, those modulations had to be taken account of.

Rather, in the case of a painter determined to eschew the third dimension, the difficulties increased; and as he was constrained by tradition to subordinate luminosity and saturation of the chromata to their synthesis and symphony, so he was compelled to turn and twist the outline, thus deforming it into volumes which, even if they did not encroach on the object in dark and luminous patches, divided at least the background into unequal zones, closely related to one another according to strict laws of rhythm, either consciously or intuitively realized. Hence our 'popular' artists resembled the Italian primitives—even Giotto—more than they did the central Asian nomads whose handiwork Soviet archaeologists have lately been unearthing in the snow-bound caves of Siberian mountains; and in the indigenous art of Bengal, in particular, the feeling for volumes had predominated for such a long time that, with the advent of the British, European influence found here a ready welcome and produced the *pats* of Chandernagore and Kalighat. There was, then, no conflict between the two traditions, but only a difference in vision. Or perhaps it was another instance of the meeting of opposites, the figure being considered the chief repository of volumes in the one case, and, in the other, the honour going to the background. At any rate,



Elephant (Tempera 9″ × 12″)

Then began a series of high-falutin lectures attended by the Civil Service and the Army; and these were followed by crowded exhibitions where provincial satraps and their sedulous feudatories indiscriminately scattered red seals among indifferent water colours which, under the merciful pall of pink and cobalt, aped the decadent Moghals, the degenerate Rajputs and the defunct Ajanta. To Jamini Roy's eyes, accustomed to European precision, the majority of those pictures must have seemed like the opium dream of an inept contortionist; and, enquire as he might, he could never discover what ear-rings of photographic authenticity had to do with the invisible ears of wraiths who patently transgressed the law of gravitation. He had been told that once a foolish crow had pecked at a bunch of painted grapes without slaking its real thirst; and he wondered why, in spite of foldless, though elaborately flowered, transparencies, the hour-glass figures walking with human feet over decorative waves, moved him to loathing rather than to lust. But the material success of his elders and immediate contemporaries was too stupendous to let him continue in his disdainful isolation. After all, he also had deliberately chosen painting as his profession; and, since he had no patrimony to squander nor relatives to fall back upon, it was essential for him to sell his canvases which, when all was said and done, were, till then, no less imitative than the pictures he so despised.

It made no difference that the masters he was copying were not those whose lineage, like that of the Moghals and Rajputs, had become extinct. Nor did it matter that it was in modern European art that the Oriental tradition was still alive and productive, still capable of inspiring work which, without blasphemy, could be compared to the glories of the Renaissance. The important fact was that European art was not an isolated phenomenon, but the branch of an ancient tree which could not be transplanted into a foreign soil and still be made to yield nourishing fruits. For instance, oil colours, the chief medium of expression for a Western painter, were never manufactured in India, and that precluded the possibility of our

playing with them; working out of doors was impracticable for most of the year, due to the rigours of the Indian climate; our men and women were too colourlessly dressed to be realistically painted in their normal clothes. Then also our emotive stimuli were distinct; the rhythms of our life were not staccato enough to be translated into dashing brush-strokes; our houses were bare, the nature we knew inclement, individuals rendered almost impersonal through centuries of social and political repression. The riotous energy of the European was out of place in this atmosphere; to attempt to depict it was, at best, a form of play-acting; and no artist who took himself seriously could long find contentment in the role.

Unfortunately for every sincere man, the path between negative and positive knowledge is seldom as straight as logicians would have it; and, though Jamini Roy was, from the beginning, certain as to what did not constitute Indian art, it took him fifteen long years of anguish and privation to discover its enduring essence. But to start with there was the master whose methods he had been utilizing in his commercial portraits, and, even if his fondness for Whistler should seem today to have been immature, that did not then prevent the foreigner from teaching him that painting differed from illustration in proportion as it subordinated the occasional to the needs of composition, and that if poetry was written with words and not ideas, then the sole constituents of a picture were lines and colour which had to form a coherent whole, irrespective of the demands of the model. One suspects, however, that the acrimony with which Whistler enunciated this principle, without having had the capacity to put it into frequent execution, had something to do with the apparent weakness of his drawing, an infirmity Jamini Roy never suffered from even in his nonage. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the distraction caused by petty details and local shadows had always appeared to him to be destructive of the final effect.

In any case, a man, beginning to consider colours as elements of design, was bound ultimately to forget their parentage and treat them not as vehicles of light but as so many slabs of

a mosaic. In this attitude, had he known of Cezanne then, he might have found a kindred spirit; and, encouraged by the Frenchman's example, he could perhaps have discarded excessive plasticity sooner to attempt a wider harmony in which light received its due, and flesh and clothing, composing their material difference, became equally reflective at long last. But that was not yet to be. He had to complete the full circle and come back to his youthful medium, this time out of disinterested curiosity, free from the least thought of profit, before perceiving his accidental affinity with more than one recent European master. In the meantime, there was the riddle of Indian art to ponder over, there was the problem of determining how far one could remain traditional without falling into cliché and pastiche and where independence turned into licence, denationalizing, almost denaturing, as it were, the eccentric. After all, human inventiveness is just another fable; the main channels of man's activity were fixed in the paleolithic age; and the utmost originality permitted to a conscious individual consists perhaps in rediscovery of a manner rejected in the remote past from a false sense of its limitations.

But I anticipate. For the moment, there were the mistakes of his contemporaries to be avoided, an honest attempt had to be made to see if the demands of the market could be met, without sacrificing firmness of drawing and accuracy of observation, without believing that bad perspective was good aesthetics and unreason the antithesis of ugliness. The public wanted sentiment. They could have it. But they should be taught that it was not a monopoly of dead emperors and legendary immortals. They would have to be warned that a picture was not a patchwork quilt of motley hues, but a tapestry of uniform materials, and that, while fidelity to local colour was a commendable virtue, it did not preclude unity of conception, accomplished through logical systematization of flat tints to replace harmonious development of light. As to the subject matter, there was the vast, everyday world of the living that lacked neither beauty and stateliness nor grace and feeling;

and to one who had his eyes attuned to it, what could be more moving than a child learning its prayers from the mother, a peasant in his bamboo hat guiding the ox-drawn plough over flaming fields, an ebony girl leaning over the mirroring river to tuck a red flower in her glistening hair?

If the content of paintings could determine their race, here was Indian art of the veriest brand. In addition, the pictures revealed a painter, master of his medium, certain of his eyes, hands and mind, possessing a palette containing only red, blue, yellow, black and an occasional white, yet capable of producing effects undreamt of by the most prodigal colourist. The only criticism I have to offer on these pictures is that their author, though obviously a genius, is not, in spite of a fleeting resemblance, of the great line that produced Renoir who, like Raphael, could be sentimental without ceasing to be intellectual and even literary without surrendering pictorial values. The picture canvases of this period, notwithstanding their undoubted economy, were a trifle too picturesque to be judged by the highest standards; and one felt instinctively afraid that, unless the painter put greater rigidity into his contours and appealed less to our tactile desires in his treatment of skin and muscles, he would inevitably become the first president of the unborn local academy. These indoor studies of outdoor subjects, while being marvellously well organized, were somewhat deficient in actuality. They were not in the least illustrations; but they meant a great deal, without signifying very much; and that separated them, once for all, from the real examples of Indian art, which, when they could not avoid history, turned it to mythology and treated the daily scene as a decorative motive, transcending space and time, transmuting human frailties to abstract forms.

What saved Jamini Roy from stagnating at this particular point was his sense of economy. Already, before entering into the above phase, he had recognized that exalted protagonists were not more necessary to painting than to tragedy; he had realized that profusion of prepared colours was a handicap and not an advantage; and now, under the tutelage of the

Chinese, he was beginning to learn that distance could be conveyed without manipulation of the acute angle, and that foreshortening was not the only method of planting a figure solidly; one could even avoid modelling and yet give expression to a face. His palette was also reduced further, and predominance accorded to greys with rare touches of red to enliven a cheek or of black to vivify the hair and the border of sarees; and hence, from the point of view of colour at least, these later canvases fell into the same class as contains Corot's *Souvenir d' Italie* and *Olympia* of Manet. It must, however, be emphasized again that there was no question of direct influence here, but another case of similar discoveries resulting from identical quests; and that, if anything, enhanced the resemblance between Manet and Jamini Roy who, both, while capable of coping with minutiae, were generally bored by distracting details which they drastically simplified in order to achieve an abiding coherence.

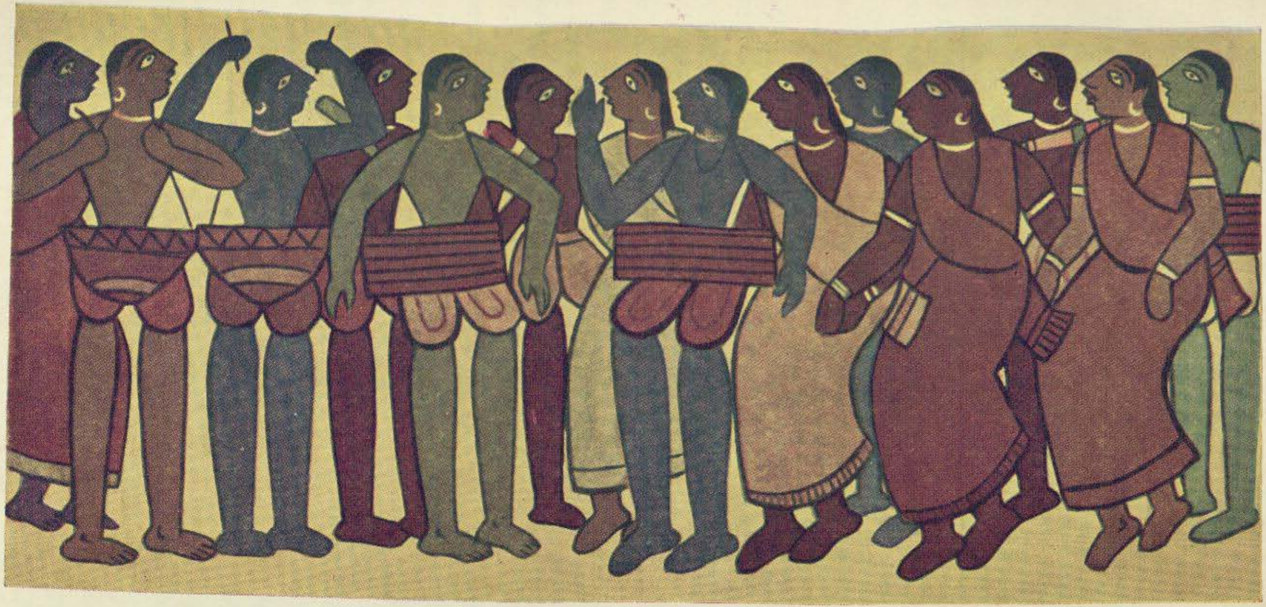
Yet the artist was not satisfied. Indian art seemed farther away than ever; and though it was much later that he painted several *Madonnas with Child* and one or two trios consisting of the three Maries to demonstrate that neither subject nor treatment determined the nationality of a picture as much as technique generated by a particular type of vision—though this was much later, still he had even then to admit that the process of purification had to be carried to its utmost limit and all adventitious support cut down to the minimum before his statement could claim parity with that of his forefathers. Till then the obvious thing to do was to see how far one could go with the line alone, shaded so as to replace the plane, without sacrificing plasticity. He had always been a logical person—a shade too logical perhaps; and, now that he had withdrawn from space, there was no reason why he should remain enmeshed in time. Grey, therefore, had to abdicate in favour of primary colours where the artist's concern was predominantly in volumes; and, when that was not so, even pigments were considered unnecessary, thick, vibrant lines being used in conjunction with graded black.

And then one day, after his progressive researches had scared away the staunchest admirers, the fog of oblivion lifted from his memory, and he suddenly remembered that when, as a little boy dominated by his pastoral father, he had been sent to the village idol-maker to satisfy his ambition to model, he was set the task of drawing formalized hands which, with practically no modification, could be fitted on to the abstract figures he was now formulating. Thereafter his affinity with the 'popular' artists of his country was never in doubt; and, if he still did not rest on his laurels, but marched on to conquer new territory, it was partly because he could not accept the Kalighat *pat* and the Bishnupur *pata*, the two easily available samples of Bengali art, as instances of racial purity. The former seemed to him to bear the clear stamp of Europe, its stylized naturalism deriving patently from that source, while the latter, though of obvious local origin, had about it an air of tottering courts where pleasure more than order was the impulse behind design. However, of the two, the Bishnupur tradition was more authentic; and this, with its frothy luxuriance strained off, gave him during the next few years the impetus to compose some of his most successful friezes, now mythological in subject, now factual in intention, partial to *gopinis,* but not exclusive of everyman.

Also colour returned in full glory—dark green and Indian red, golden yellow and mandarin blue, rich brown and ivory black, even dove grey and old rose, but never shading into one another, nor allowed to suggest the least likeness with the natural colours of the objective world. They were all applied uniformly, the very brush strokes being carefully obliterated in order to destroy every suspicion, or perhaps shadow, of actuality; and thus indigo trees leaned against scarlet skies and green girls stood or sat in sculptural poses, offering white leaves and black flowers to absent gods; or the Blue Boy danced his cosmic dance in the two-dimensional alcove of his spaceless hut, the crimson of his hands and feet complementing the spangled brown of the Himalayan cedars flattened against a dove grey wall. But it was not the unreality of the colours that

made them so peculiarly Indian; it was their quality and combination, as well as the fact that, after having used oil and water colours for nearly two decades, Jamini Roy had suddenly discarded them in favour of tempera as a medium not only best suited to his special talent but also as the fittest to withstand the rigours of the Indian weather. Moreover, tempera was a local product and so cheap that wasteful play was permissible; and it could be put on canvas, cloth, paper or wood with equal effect and permanence.

All the same, it was once again impossible to stop; he was not yet satisfied that he had found the key to Bengali painting; and, as an adverse climate had destroyed most old samples of that art, Jamini Roy was compelled to seek for the expressions of the Bengali spirit in literature which luckily had escaped a similar fate. He agreed with the scholars that Vaishnavism was Bengal's special contribution to Indian culture; and he made it a daily habit to turn over the pages of some Vaishnava text or other before going to bed. And thus one night he chanced on a story that seemed to him to solve not only his life-long problem as to what was Indian art but also the question of what was art in general. It was related there that Chaitanya had become such an adept in the cult of *Bhakti* that it was impossible to speak the name of Krishna in his presence without his falling into an instant swoon of ecstasy. The disciples, therefore, had decided to guard the master so zealously that a budding poet, who, attracted by the fame of the saint, had come all the way to Nawadwip to present him with a long devotional poem, found himself denied an audience. At last, after completely wearing out his shoes, he persuaded the chief disciple, Swarup Damodar, to give him a hearing. But no sooner had he recited the dedicatory quatrain than Swarup Damodar shocked the admiring assembly by exclaiming that the thing was as horrible as the excreta of the crow, since at the very outset the author had committed the unpardonable sin of comparing the prophet, who was after all a mere mortal, to Jagannath the Lord of the Universe, thereby transgressing the first law of aesthetics that proscribed confu-



Dancers

(Tempera 34″ × 15″)

sion between the real and the unreal, between the natural and the supernatural.

The moral was obvious: our tradition did not forbid the entry of the objective world into art; it merely demanded that fact and fiction should present themselves separately and on their own merits. But who was to make the necessary distinction between them? Not surely the civilized adult who, through centuries of sophistication and seclusion from nature, had literally lost his senses; but the cave man who painted in Altamira, the savage who carves wood in New Guinea, the three-year old child who sees the human form as two unequal ovoids with four radiating lines. Of course, such objectivity was unattainable by any modern man after perhaps his seventh year. Nevertheless, there were village artists even now living in the remoter districts of Bengal, who could still render their sense experience without artifice, who had not forgotten, as we had, that only from a distance was the wholeness of an object visible and distance flattened the sphere and reduced the cube to a plane. What was gradually stuffed into the fragmented mould by the beholder, according to the means at his disposal. Every honest painter should, therefore, indicate, whenever possible, how much in a picture was his own property and to what extent he was indebted outside. This the uneducated artist did by making the man he respected bigger than the one he disliked, although he saw them both as nearly equal; and he was not being unfaithful to his eyes, if he did not, in changing the size, alter also the visible shape.

The alternative was to cultivate the near vision that transformed everything to a group of unorganized squares or surfaces; and, because Jamini Roy could not claim the same intimacy with things as could a cubist born in the heyday of European technology, he had to fall back upon the distant vision which was no less logically authentic than the short-sight vision of the present-day Westerner. For the modesty and the humility of the primitive painter was never illogical, as was evident when he was commissioned to depict a religious tale by some unlettered client and had to come to terms with a

reality he firmly believed in but had no perceptual knowledge of. His approach to the problem was then instinctively similar to the traditional manner perfected by his urbane brethren under the patronage of enlightened princes, with this essential difference, however, that, while the sophisticated townsman had become sceptical enough to think that all reality was merely a system of conventions which could be so changed and standardized as to connote the unnatural, the villager, through faith, was led to the conclusion that the supernormal was not less, but more, solid than the world of senses, a fact that necessitated an alteration in everyday values and made esoteric *mudras* superfluous by dwarfing trees and heightening heroes. Hence these illustrations were not just recondite experiments in ornamentation meant to amuse the discerning few, but strangely alive with perhaps the unconscious vitality of the whole race (using the word 'unconscious' after Jung and not according to Freud); and that may be why they were better adapted to the incidents from the life of Rama rather than of Krishna whose eroticism was more suited to the classical treatment.

Since Rousseau, a desperate belief in the virtues of the primitive has been the abiding characteristic of the changeful romantic; and Jamini Roy, although never of that persuasion in so far as it bases itself on self-indulgence and incapacity to take infinite pains, was yet too distrustful of the city where the traditional modes of Indian life were fast breaking out into complicated counterpoint, was, in fact, too much of a quietist to elude altogether the suspicion of being an escapist. But it was not the absence of contemporaneity in his pictures nor their lack of syncopation that caused such consternation or evoked such ridicule among his fellow painters during the first exhibition of his work in the above mentioned genre. Till then, while seldom receiving their encouragement, he had usually been courted by the organizers of public exhibitions, not only because his productivity was remarkable in the midst of universal sterility, but also because he had a manner which, they never quite knew why, had, without ever eliciting general

approbation, always impressed a handful of enthusiasts. Anyhow, these were the men that counted. For, as I have already pointed out, the British had so upset our society that artists, finding themselves deprived of their corresponding public, had renounced their utilitarian function entirely and taken to copying exotic or outworn fashions, in the hope that they would thereby appeal at least to the acquisitive instinct of a few moneyed collectors. At last the opportunity had arrived to be even with the snobs and at the same time do Jamini Roy down. It could now be safely maintained that he was no longer the best imitator of Western painting nor the surest practitioner of Indian art, but a plagiarist cribbing from actual peasants.

Most of this was certainly not in the conscious minds of his detractors; and when one of his former teachers forgot himself to the extent of publicly remarking, in respect of a finely executed group of Santhal boys playing with bows and arrows, that the drawing could be bettered by a half-witted child, he was, in all probability, genuinely scandalized, because, as his own work showed, he lacked the capacity to think cogently about art, was entirely ignorant of its history and had so lost touch with the country that he never knew where a living tradition was still to be found. Nevertheless, the fetish of ancestor worship had swelled his bank balance; and this palpable success gave weight to his words, with the result that impartial, albeit incompetent, critics felt that they had done more than their duty to Jamini Roy by praising him as the ablest exponent of the *pat* technique and suggesting that he had abandoned it due to failing powers. Of course, he had abandoned that tradition; but he had done so in accordance with developmental laws implicit in the tradition itself, in order that its scope might be widened and a more complex life, non-existent when the tradition was established, could be brought within its range; and, had his judges understood the distinction between art and archaeology, they would have realized further that the importance of individual initiative was never overlooked in our tradition which considered music

as the norm of all other arts, insisting thereby that the artist, while limited as to essential ingredients, was permitted, even compelled, to be original in regard to improvization, so that new combinations of feelings could be formed within the framework of enduring emotions.

However that may be, after such display of general disapproval, it was no use appearing in public; and, though friends and sympathizers could yet be persuaded to visit the private exhibitions he periodically arranged in his cramped lodgings, money had become so scarce that the family wardrobe was frequently pillaged for dhotis and sarees to replace canvas and evening meals systematically sacrificed to buy paint. Of course, the new rich still wanted to see their progenitors perpetuated in vile portraits; and, as shreds of his former reputation persisted in clinging to him, they could perhaps be induced to commission him even now. But he considered it dishonest to relieve them of their superfluous cash by display of a virtuosity in which he no longer believed; and, rather than do that, he retired within himself, subsisting on the barest of necessities and saving every scrap of paper he could lay his hands on, with a view to pressing them later into the service of the pictures he rarely sold to some charitable person. Meanwhile, he worked, and worked hard, to enlarge the scope of his new technique, not to take in, it is true, the industrialized city which he naturally abominated, but to grasp the material reality of India without the English.

For he could not deny the truth of the criticism that latterly his concern had been less with form than with formality; and, if thereby he had succeeded in becoming significant, he, at the same time, ran the danger of falling into meaninglessness. It was now imperative to cure the thinness of some of his recent work, and, while preserving its abstract appeal, to eliminate its abstruse character. In other words, this was no time for playing with dead conventions; he himself had to supply the context to his own isolation. Otherwise, he could not avoid the mistakes of his European fellow-workers who, failing to recognize the difference between the formal and the private,

expected their audience to solve the jig-saw puzzle to which they, due to their greater analytical powers, had reduced the world of appearance. A conglomeration of variously tinted shapes, presented in the flat, with a hint of the third dimension in the background, could not, however, be reconstituted into a human figure, unless one was such a specialist in painting as to see only coloured surfaces in whatever direction one happened to look. For the rest of us, objects were the repositories of colour, as well as of mental associations, some of which, through similarity of conditioning, had become universal enough to be considered objective; and their absence, therefore, from visual experience was surely a personal peculiarity that had to be suppressed; else an inverted subjectivism was bound to result.

Besides, recognizability was no enemy of form, but something that conferred universality on the particular, in so far as it was known to be itself by everyone who could distinguish it from its unrecognizable fellows; and the essence of this recognizability, at least in regard to human beings, did not reside in the individual's shape, size or colour, all of which depended on the distance that separated him from the observer, nor even in his facial features and expression which similarly were changeable and remained invisible from afar, but was to be sought in his gestures which, once discerned, brought instant recognition. Of course, they, along with movement, were also deceptive, as they lent themselves to frequent malobservation, and, in consequence, ended by setting up false identity. Nonetheless, unlike colour and size, they could always be considered in isolation, being unaffected, except as to their origin, by the environment wherein they occurred. Thus, for the painter, who was denied continuity of description, gestures tended to equate themselves, if not with the form of the individual, at least with the type to which he belonged; and, since Jamini Roy's present problem was to make concrete the generalities that constitute an event rather than the metaphorical presentation of some Crocean experience that is immutably self-expressed the moment it comes into existence, he occupied

himself during the next couple of years with pictures that, avoiding all reportage, were still convincingly factual. This he seemingly accomplished by marrying expressionism to naturalism, with post impressionism acting as the match-maker. For, to do it, he had seldom to modify the typical contour to suit an actual face; and yet he succeeded in portraying age and profession, class and religion of the figures, not so much by means of unambiguous symbols, as by way of characteristic poses, delineated with an eye to intricate rhythmical pattern.

These figure paintings of triadic widows counting the rosary, of quintuplicate *bauls* playing the one-stringed zither, of concordant crowds celebrating a feast, of mussalmans praying and women going to temples, of mothers with children and patriarchs in their grandeur, seemed to mirror a Bengal that even the British had not been able to destroy; and, in addition, they revealed an artist who had almost purged himself of the pleasure impulse, so austere were their curves, so unostentatious their blues, yellows and purples. Yet they were uneconomical in a queer sort of way; they gave an impression of profusion that the artist had never quite intended; and, while gestures were supreme, all expression had not been transmuted into them; they lingered here and there, distracting the eye and detracting from the formal unity, raising questions as to whether their insufficiency as portraits was due to the inability of the artist or not. It was, therefore, necessary to attempt further simplification, to see if gestures alone would not breathe life into a featureless mass, fixing its type, even recording its history; and in this Jamini Roy was no less successful than in any other aim he previously set himself to attain.

A leaning green ellipse, with three white ovals triangularly placed, looming over a red one, conveyed the full pathos of destitute blindness, whereas a like scheme, presented in a different slant, indicated the pride and fullness of a vigorous middle age. A patch of mottled red, with just the eye-brows and the ridge of the nose outlined, left no doubt that it was the bust of a peasant; but an arrangement in red, yellow and white,

almost similarly mottled, recalled an outrageous coquette. These were surely abstractions, but abstractions that had not forgotten their concrete bases, and so did not come under the criticism of recent semasiologists who, owing to their greater familiarity with abstractions most common in Europe, thought inevitably that the sole purpose of an abstraction was to pass from wide to wider analogies, devoid of all definition. The Indian tradition has always been against such nebulosity: it has, on the contrary, held that even the concrete, as experienced through sensation, was too insufficiently sharp to yield unequivocal forms which were the reward of conative intellection within predetermined limits. Hence the realized image of a god who personified some distinct attribute was infinitely more precise than that of a man who, having innumerable aspects, could seldom be fixed in contemplation; and that is perhaps why these pictures of Jamini Roy, without making the least concession to anything non-pictorial, are so poignantly dramatic, so rich in humanity and full of such insight into character.

At the same time, he was developing a new technique of portraiture. As a matter of fact, even when most obsessed by the purely formal relation between the line and the volume, he had not entirely abandoned the representational method. But he had, perhaps mistakenly, believed that, far from surpassing, he could never go anywhere near the European masters in their particular excellence. So he had always considered his realistic work as exercise that laid the foundation for the ultimate abstraction. That this estimate erred on the side of modesty was evident in almost every such canvas he cared to exhibit; and it made no difference whether the subject depicted was two provincial matrons in their Sunday best going to church during a sleepy forenoon or an aboriginal woman fondling her upsurging baby under the opalescent sky of autumn, the dexterity of the drawing, the sureness of the colour perspective, the mastery shown in rendering space and air were the marks of a born painter who would be distinguished in any country. In addition, they revealed an eco-

nomy and sense of composition that were all Jamini Roy's own.

All this notwithstanding, they were not portraits in any sense of the word; and it remained to be seen if such sparseness of details could still achieve likeness. There is no doubt at all that it could; and his study of a middle-aged Bengali woman, done in umber, white and black on an orange and olive background recreated living similitude by a simple extension of what he learnt long ago from the Chinese. For here too he eschewed shading or gradation of colours and rendered the difference between planes by abrupt changes in pigment without impairing tonality, however; and, as he has never, not even in his most abstract designs, hesitated to exploit the suggestibility of his audience, so without in the least modifying pictorial qualities, he invested one of his sitters with paranoiac character by a rigidity of the blue-coated shoulders, reminiscent alike of Mussolini and Modigliani. But, successful as these portraits were, the most interesting was a black head on a yellow background, where anatomy and design reached such fusion that representational values no longer militated against pattern which could be almost cubistic and yet make room for the psychological insight of the artist.

Of course, this concern with volumetric shapes did not mark a new departure in Jamini Roy's attitude; and, as I have pointed out before, even during his most linear phase, he considered the contour to be the boundary of formal surfaces. However, till quite recently, his approach to these surfaces was external, the eye travelling from the periphery inwards to the main features, like the nose and the mouth; and where such arresting impediments were absent, as in the male torso, he tended to glide on to the outer edge again, without impairing, it is true, the typical characteristics of the subject, but failing, all the same, to do full justice to its character. Now suddenly, perhaps because of the exigencies of portraiture, he found this treatment insufficient; and he set himself to build up figures from within gradually working outwards through the interrelation of innumerable small masses. Besides, his

control over the line had, in the meantime, become so sure that he could no longer feel creative when handling this mechanical medium; and unless he gave up painting altogether or considered it simply as a source of financial gain—for, by this time, he was making a slight profit on all his exhibitions which he held at least twice a year—he had to undertake fresh experiments. These resulted in the three monumental studies entitled respectively 'A Peasant', 'A Baul' and 'Prayer', where even gestures were deemed superfluous, a mere rearrangement of the lumps and surfaces of the human body being sufficient for the purpose of fixing the type of the figures and conferring dramatic intensity on them.

At this point it should not be out of place to anticipate a possible criticism by the reader who might well ask why so much time and energy had to be devoted to the discovery of the principles underlying Indian art, when in the end one was compelled to admit that it differed from its Western counterpart only in name; and the answer would not be the repetition of the hoary platitude that art is, after all, universal. As a matter of fact, it is not; rather it is universal only because our vocabularies have not words enough to denote the particularity inherent in every activity, whatever its apparent similarity to others; and so, if the want of a sufficient number of proper nouns is to force us into forgetfulness of the distinction between the arts of India and Europe, the same cause should make us see similitude between two such divergent languages as the German and the Bengali, since they both belong to the Indo-Germanic group. All the same, the Bengali spirit has to be distinguished from the spirit of the rest of India, neglecting for the moment the peculiarity and unlikeness that separate each culture zone from the one adjoining it; and, for lack of a better term, the Bengali must be said to have possessed a more materialistic and pragmatic outlook than every other Indian. No accident made Bengal the first clearing house of Western ideas in India; and although it would take us too far afield to consider whether this native affinity helped the Bengali to assimilate European

civilization with such deceptive ease, yet it is not irrelevant to state here that the last great revolt against transcendental Hinduism occurred in this province where, even before Chaitanya, man was declared to be the measure of all truth.

In other words, the Bengali has naturally viewed life from the standpoint of immanence rather than of transcendence; and this has resulted in the humanization of the gods and heroes of the Hindu pantheon, making Shiva into a jovial glutton dominated by his young wife and turning Rama into a benign rustic performing doughty deeds by chance. In the graphic arts, this tendency has manifested itself in a naturalism purified of its adventitious elements; and, apart from the work of village artists whose treatment of the invisible in terms of the visual world I have already described, even in such courtly plaques as have been excavated in profusion at Paharpur and Mahasthan, the ideal has been strangely Cezannesque, in so far as the principle of composition was arrived at not through the so-called 'seedless' contemplation but by way of a complete surrender to nature. I mean thereby that the whorls and arcs into which these sixth-century terra cottas reduced birds and beasts, the arabesques they formed out of human couples were not imposed from above by introspecting artists, but obtained in the process of objective analysis in much the same way as the cylinders, cones and spheres of Cezanne who later on synthesized them into an unprecedented arrangement that corresponded to his organic vision and thus passed the test proposed by Alexander to distinguish between art and nature.

Perhaps the collective unconscious does exist after all. Perhaps instincts are not as few as psychologists would have us believe. Perhaps atavism is a more frequent phenomenon than we are prepared to admit. For, how otherwise can one explain the similarity of conception between the Paharpur tiles and Jamini Roy's pictures of cranes and herons, ducks and hornbills, horses and elephants, cats and lions, or even of dolls, in which scholars have tried to trace the influence of Egypt, but which, in reality, are Mahasthan figures stylized in subsequent years? Not only these geometrical compositions, but also the

new rhythms he has been experimenting with in his latest painting of Santhal dances are less like the complication and confusion of form aimed at by Picasso in his reduction of the bull-fight to a symbol than the harmonics perfected, possibly two centuries before Christ, in the Mahasthan reliefs of Hara-Parvati; or, better still, in those where a starveling can show authentic ribs and spine without coming into conflict with the decorative design, a cobra can frighten and look ornamental at the same time, amusing monkeys and obstinate boars, life-like faces and veracious anatomy, asymmetrical planes and angular lines can be combined to yield counterpoint more satisfying than the melodic structure of classical sculpture.

On the other hand, Jamini Roy has never been a slave of any one school; and, however much he may have wanted to paint in the style of his ancestors, the very fact of this desire having been a conscious one has tended to isolate him from them. For, while they sought just to express themselves in the manner most natural to them or nearest at hand, his real problem has been to find a technique which in its stark veracity abjured communication altogether and depended increasingly on communion needing no mediation of make-believe. In other words, there have been moments in Jamini Roy's career when he has seemed to turn away from painting and almost become a mere experimenter; and, even in his most imitative mood, he has been no more of a copyist than was Manet in harking back to Titian's *Venus* for the motif of *Olympia*. In the circumstances, it would be absurd to think of him as the last of our 'popular' artists; and although my admiration for them compels me to compare them with Matisse, whom they resemble in the purity of their artistic impulse, yet it is Picasso, in whom the same purity is further refined by intellect, who, among the present-day artists, is most like Jamini Roy.

At any rate, the experimental urge is equally strong in Jamini Roy; and he also takes up a subject and then paints version after version, breaking, distorting and reforming the theme, repeating, as it were, in a few months a whole historical

process of long duration. All the same, it would do no one any good to pursue the kinship farther; and, if it be true that criticism defeats its purpose unless it sets up a host of false analogies, I would invert Mr T. S. Eliot's famous statement to assert that, because I consider Jamini Roy to be a great painter, he reminds me of many forerunners whom it would take too long to list. But his affinity with Rouault is clear; he is frequently reminiscent of Derain; and in the way he has latterly handled brush and oil colours, as well as in the type of the male face that has most attracted him, he must be classed somewhat like Van Gogh whose vision, on the contrary, was qualitatively different. Nonetheless, these are fortuitous resemblances, resulting from the similarity of cause rather than of effect; and not only has Jamini Roy lived all his life in a city where few specimens of contemporary European art have found their way, but his ignorance of every European language is too colossal to have permitted him to acquire even a nodding acquaintance with any aesthetic theory now current in the West.

I shall not attempt to place Jamini Roy in a possible hierarchy of painters, but end on a personal note by detailing my only objection against him. In spite of the ceaseless development he has shown right through a strenuous life, he has not yet succeeded in breaking down the aristocratic barrier that continues to separate him from the contemporary scene; and I suspect that his aloofness is not so much a matter of election as of an inherent tendency towards retrogression that expresses itself philosophically in a purblind Gandhism, nourished on revivalist dreams. It is perhaps this that determines the choice of subjects for his pictures; and by preference he seems to find themes with evident rhythm rather than create order out of chaos by a supreme act of will. Why otherwise should he be attracted by the traditional dignity of the dancing Santhals and repelled by them when they are drunk and disorderly, fascinated by the primordial peasant and appalled by the industrial worker, or lyrically moved by the praying muslims

and revolted by their riotous frenzy? He now possesses a technique comprehensive enough to cope with almost everything; and, could he but enlarge his sympathy, the demonstrations of organized labour should present him with fewer formal difficulties than the excesses of a *kirtan* procession.

Again, development is not an indispensable qualification for an artist. Especially in classical times great painters have maintained an even excellence throughout lengthy lives; and, if, despite all his traditionalism, Jamini Roy is impelled by the urge of perfection to pass from phase to phase, it must be because he possesses less equanimity than his choice of subjects gives us to believe. Of course, to conquer one's spiritual restlessness is the aim of every discipline; but to act calm while feeling disturbed is the sure sign of dangerous repression, even of subconscious dishonesty. After all, the turmoil of our cities is by now as firmly rooted in our soil as the stillness of our plains and the majesty of our hills; and, since Jamini Roy's one ambition in life has been to lose himself in the identity of his people, he must not turn away from them when they are on their predestined way. Of all men I can think of, he is the best fitted to become their representative and give shape to their aspirations; and I am sure that, could he but complete his work, he would not fail them. As it is, he is the most satisfying artist I have ever known: we both look back on the same past and are confronted by the same future.

1939

Part Two

that it is the light of some shooting star moving on its way to final destruction.

It should not be surmised from what I have said that the modern poet is responsible for this inevitable fall of poetry. Far from it; never in the history of literature has the poet seemed so venerable as he does today. For a long time the declaration was heard, in proper and improper places, that the poet is a superman; perhaps only now is the justification for such a claim becoming clear. For it is the poet who boldly continues to guard the portals of beauty, even while the steam-roller of civilization, having pulverized the monuments of the past, is fast bearing down on him. There is no hope in his heart. He understands that defeat is inevitable. He knows that he stands alone. To those for whose sake he has waged his rebellion, his monstrous audacity is only another name for insanity; nothing except fate can save his familiar world. Yet he never ceases trying; he never stops singing. The song may not be one of joy; wrath and grief may make his voice too shrill; perhaps he sings so loud to overcome his fear. Nevertheless, his voice, and his voice alone, rises above the increasing strident uproar of impending desolation. Therefore he deserves our saluatation. Though eclipsed, he deserves our homage.

Many will argue that I am exaggerating the case. For, if poetry is truly art, it has nothing to fear from the hostility of its environment. This argument cannot indeed be ignored. Art is so indispensable precisely because it brings about a congruity between man and the world around him. It is true that art cannot survive in antagonistic social circumstances; but unless ultimately it rises above its environment, it is futile. The aptness of the argument can be borne out by reference to modern painting and music. Whatever may have happened in other spheres of fine art, it must be admitted that, in contemporary music and painting, even the formidable, menacing aspects of modern civilization are not deprived of the blessing of beauty.

Let me clarify a point. The above statement has nothing whatever to do with that hue and cry, in the name of Art for Art's Sake, which filled the air for a while during the nineties of

the last century. That was, rather, a protest against the false vanity of Wilde and his intellectual friends. Whatever we may have lost in the past four or five decades, the interest on the capital of experience has grown. Endless encounters have taught us that genuine individualism is a rare quality—not only on this earth, but even in the most lonely corners of the whole universe. Since art is a part of creation rather than preternatural, its only test of worth is the touching of it on the philosopher's stone of temporal life. That does not necessarily mean that all poets are slaves of eternity. But it certainly may be said that only rootless poetry is free of earthly ties. Such poetry can perhaps escape death in the shelter of the pyramid; and even if it helps people to satisfy their curiosity, it still fails to answer satisfactorily the unspoken queries of the human heart.

By this measure, many literary problems are simplified. With its help it is possible to explain why Tennyson, while having all the qualities of an epic poet, failed to produce a good epic poem. The function of a poet is to fashion a garland of ultimate perceptions from the haphazard experiences of his everyday life. His object is to bring about a synthesis between the limited life around him and the everflowing stream of eternity. His vow is to reflect pure consciousness by dilating his own. This cannot be accomplished by asceticism, or by sacrifice, or by following the dictates of an aristocratic sense of propriety. The emancipation of poetry lies in acceptance. If the poet wants anything from eternity, he cannot afford to be fastidious. He must move through the dark alleys of the city with a begging-bowl in his hand, asking for what is left after the feast is over—there is no other way. One cannot leap over the path to poetry. He must walk every step of it; he must revere every particle of dust on it; each thorn on the way demands its drop of blood. There is no way to flee away from it, nor can he stop. To stop is to court death; to try to go back is to be trampled under the feet of the travellers behind. Anyone unwilling to admit the truth of this statement will do well to remind himself of the final misery of the poetry of the 19th century. While Cezanne was trying to find the mark of beauty on the white-washed walls of a farm-

house, the tearful Swinburne was running from grove to grove in search of the nymph of the forest. The ultimate hollowness of unrealistic art becomes very evident at this point.

It was probably the bankruptcy of the mammoth business house of Tennyson and Swinburne that prompted other poets of the time to take stock of their holdings. Consequently it became abundantly clear that the conceitedly sensitive poetry, in trying to keep up its traditional front, had lost everything of its own. The accountants easily proved that all the poets of the 19th century, excepting only three or four at the very beginning, spent lavishly without ever giving a thought to income. It never entered anyone's head that however large the property, if it did not expand with the passage of time and the growth of the family, it had to come to an end. Even the gold mine finally runs dry. It was, therefore, found in the beginning of the 20th century that endless exploitation of predecessors sucked the marrow from the bones of poetry: meaning and emotion were separated from it, leaving, in an echoing desert, a skeleton —torn, crumbling, devoid of any character of its own.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water...

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water...
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From door of mudcracked house
                                        If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water

And water
A spring
A pool among the rocks
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But the sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water. (T. S. Eliot)

Many will, however, refuse to treat the foregoing passage as an exact description of the 19th century. They will, I know, cite Browning's name and claim that here is an exception. It must be constantly admitted that Browning did not merely ruminate in the desert of 19th century poetry, but that he tried to create as well. Except for Wordsworth and Coleridge, Browning alone understood that, if he wanted to live, it would no longer do for the fairy-tale prince of poetry to sit dreaming in the innermost ruins of his crumbling ancestral castle. He would have to come out, leaving aside his moth-eaten turban, his rusty armour, and the thread that was once a garland; he would have to come into the open, where virtue and vice, good and evil, gods and demons all crowd together. Among his contemporaries, Browning alone indistinctly admitted that the rhythm of the *Nataraja*[1] does not always please the ear, that in the melody of creation the groans of the woman in labour are occasionally heard. He alone knew that if the absence of the fortunate and prosperous makes the procession of life glamourless, the refusal to admit the destitute and humiliated turns it into a funeral march.

Since he did appreciate this, Browning was the first poet to attempt to mould poetry in the cast of his times. He attempted, but he did not succeed. An enquiry into this noble failure reveals two features of his poetry. Browning's heroes and heroines, with one or two unique exceptions, all came to this world on a voyage from the other one. Secondly, the fallen

[1] The cosmic Dancer, usually the god Siva, whose dance heralds the dissolution of creation.

whom he defended erred either unwillingly or because of the adversity of Providence. The first feature indicates not acceptance but escapism; the second is not introspection but posing, the conceited pretentiousness of a pious defence attorney, trying to trick the judge on the bench with legerdemain. It may be rude to say, but it is nonetheless true, that Browning was a Christian, not Christ. He wanted to show that, while in this world, the fallen could not sit beside the believer, but that nevertheless he would obtain God's mercy in the other; what was not accomplished in life would be fulfilled in death; in the meantime, there would be no obstacle to the endless pilgrimage of the usual world, and unperturbed presence would reveal the general well-being of the universe, and at the same time totally conceal the evident queries of the unbeliever. Unfortunately, even in this auspicious world, perversion is so vast that I, for one, cannot bow my head to Browning's idea of indomitable goodness. An unhealthy delight in the sensual filth of 'yellow books' appears to me more natural than this unrealistic view of life.

Anyway, the 20th century dawned amidst such exaggeration. Consequently, no honest poet failed to realize that truth could be introduced into this deceit only by an abandonment of infatuation with glamour and by the urgent and thorough eradication of all insubstantial materials. For there is no point in building a new house unless it is both fit for habitation and in keeping with its time. Proper care should be taken that its wet walls do not obstruct the sunlight, and rattling the chains on its locked doors, that the winds of the universe do not turn. It is no longer enough to lay brick on brick, with an eye to a meaningless external grandeur. It will not do to ignore the people who live in it. It will not do to forget that they are human beings, made of flesh and blood, slaves to joy and sorrow, variable, increasing. It is no matter if fashionable architecture has to be rejected for their sake; it is no matter if this rejection calls forth the unjust epithets 'materialist', 'atheist', and so forth. Adherence to reality is demanded of the poet on the first,

second, third, and final counts. 'Reality' and 'sincerity' are the basic *mantras*[2] of the 20th century.

Nowadays we look upon the word 'sincerity' with some suspicion, because in this world a great deal of deception has been practised under the shelter of high-sounding words; this has far surpassed other means of fraud. But despite that, today the term is indispensable. Sincerity in literature means a marriage between veiled suggestion and direct vision. To simplify, it means that when a poet bespeaks any vision, or object, or emotion, his poetry should be put in the container which is appropriate to that object of emotion alone, and no attempt should be made to evaluate in terms of popular usage.

Some may raise the question of how a poet can reject popular usage and still take pride in accepting everything in the world. A sufficient answer to that is the reminder that 'general custom' and 'world' are not synonymous. One may disregard the Indian Penal Code and still claim India as one's own. Similarly, the world will not stop if its popular usage is ignored. As the ruler of India does not represent India's real qualities, so the habits and manners of any group of people do not reflect the bearing of the whole human race. He who refuses to accept death has no place on the earth; but the book of life is not closed to him who has lost faith in chastity—indeed, he may eventually turn up as a real devotee of life. Because death is fundamental to life, disregard of death belittles life. But compared to the drama of the whole of life, the human body, or for that matter all human society, is so insignificant that non-acceptance of the idea of feminine virtue does not decrease, but even increases the value of life itself.

If this view of realism in poetry is considered by some as spiritualistic, let them not forget that without a metaphysical background, even a man of obtuse feelings, to say nothing of a poet, cannot live. If there is no propitious order at the root of the universe, it is incumbent on the poet to establish an imagined one, by which the fragments of our daily experiences

[2] *mantra* is a ritual formula with great power inherent in it; it is repeated in order to focus the attention in meditation, and to realize its power.

become significant and integral. Without consciousness, pure consciousness and resolution, selfless and unassuming resolution, it is impossible to bring any kind of order to the incongruity of our environment. But it is unjust to reflect too much on this: that these two guiding stars are necessary only for the poet, that they are within the rights only of the poet. For anyone who does not like to wander aimlessly, for anyone who really wants to reach his destination, these two are indispensable as guiding lights in the impending gloom. But the honour and prestige of the poet lie in the fact that the endless queries of mankind find expression in his mouth; the significance of his role is also limited to this. If a poet's own quest is contradictory to the universal one, he must seek his Paradise in the deserted rooms of the library. Perhaps this is the sense in which E. M. Forster called all great art impersonal. The personal experience of a poet has no value unless it becomes one with eternal experience on the shoal of time, the fourth dimension. That is why a poet cannot refuse to accept anything; his only choice is to use his sense of time.

An analogy may clarify the point. A poet is like a matchmaker. With the union of the bride and groom his work is finished; it is ridiculous to worry about whether he will be remembered in the future or not. But exceptional intelligence and consideration, and perhaps some intuition too, are required to make a match. To know the list of prospective brides and grooms is not enough: he must have sufficient understanding to sense who was made for whom. The happiness or unhappiness of his own married life does not help, but hinders, his work; partisanship only makes for trouble. For if, following the dictates of his own taste, he misses the opportunity to make a match for some plain one, it is clear that the time has come for him to retire from the trade. On the other hand, an attempt to apply his professional experience to the running of his own home life may be equally disastrous. Independent impartiality is his only resort. If, even after that, a marriage turns out to be a failure, a change in future conceptions of marriage is

inevitable. Some such idea led T. S. Eliot to call the poet a catalytic agent.

Many will, perhaps, be startled to hear that individualism has no place in art. Though they might not say so in so many words, they will imagine that the millstone of civilization has ground everyone into dust. For such a long time, only the poet was a little bit apart; he alone was left to remind man of his lost diversity; now his time has come, and the last obstacle to the systematic reduction of giants to pigmies has been removed. Actually, this apprehension is unfounded, for only when the individual merges himself completely with the universal does the caged true self find freedom. We have seen this proven time and time again in history. And even now, in this age of revolution in our attitudes towards time-honoured precepts, Buddha, Christ, and St. Francis of Assisi are not idle, meaningless names; the power of these names is still capable of working wonders. Nonetheless, I do not want to hold up religious ideals before poets; these men are memorable to me not because they were religious, but their uncovetous self-obliteration deserves mention here. As greatness may only be achieved by sacrificing the ego, the end of personal joy and sorrow is the beginning of great poetry. But this does not necessarily mean that there is no difference between one poet and another. Despite their greatness of spirit, the Buddha and the Christ are different; so are Shakespeare and Goethe, despite the fact that both are great poets.

The use of an analogy may perhaps resolve the apparent contradiction in the foregoing conclusion. Poetry is like the sea, and the poet like a river. A river may easily lose itself in the desert along its way, if it wants to; but if it intends to immerse itself in the sea, it must take a particular course. It has the same destination that other rivers have; but it definitely has the opportunity and the right to maintain its identity in its depth, its movement, and its chemical composition. On the other hand, the sea of poetry too has no dearth of diversity of its own. Its coast is hilly in one place and muddy in another; one part of it is rough with waves, another shining

smooth. Even its shape is not forever constant; within it, human consciousness erupts constantly, and its shores, as a result, now expand and now diminish. Moreover, variation can be discerned even in the taste of it. Nevertheless, it was a transcendental quality which is always and everywhere present in it, and for want of a better term, it will perhaps not be improper to call this eternal quality of poetry beauty.[3] The mark of this beauty is however present in varying degree in all created works, and this is why the link between poetry and the world at large is self-evident.

People whose vision is still coloured by 19th century 'individualism' will probably dismiss the natural individuality of impersonal poetry. They will perhaps refuse to concede to poetry the right of self-determination on the ground that, if that happens, no distinctions of individual notes, but a horrible cacophony will be heard in literature. If the argument seeks to prove the comparative superiority of older poetry over the modern, I have nothing to say; personal likes and dislikes cannot be debated. But whatever else there might have been, there was no abundance of individualism in 19th century poetry. It is sufficient to recall the professorial dicta heard in youth, as proof of the truth of this remark. I do not know whether examinees are still required to quote 'appropriate lines' to demonstrate Wordsworth's influence on later poets, but in our day only those with retentive memories could score high. If only I had attained that elusive power of memory in those days, today I could easily establish that poets of the 18th and 19th centuries never sought to gain individualism, but that they merely took refuge in a decorum, acceptable to all, in order to please contemporary readers. In other words, with the change in circumstances, the goddess of poetry, giving up decking herself in natural flowers, orders more durable golden ornaments instead; she never went to a tryst with the poet without hiding her imminent old age behind indiscriminate vanity. Wordsworth put an end to the vanity of this ornate darling-of-all, by bringing about, in the early nineteenth cen-

[3] The term is *labaṇya*, 'grace' or 'charm'.

tury, a synthesis between the literary and the spoken language; because of this he is revered by us, because of this his name is written forever on the monument of literature.

Wordsworth, in his attempt to bring about a synthesis between prose and verse, however, was not successful, because the language of daily life is really different from that of poetry —a difference that is inherent and valid. Prose depends on knowledge, while poetry seeks out intuition. Prose, therefore, paces deliberately, while poetry dances to the rhythms of emotion. Prose claims our recognition, poetry seeks our devotion. While wearied prose paints a picture by drawing line after line, poetry magically suggests the same by arranging a few dots on the canvas of our sympathy. Success in this mystic object of poetry comes by the aid of symbols. Words have two aspects: one is their literal meaning, the other is their power to arouse emotion. Words are related to prose in terms of the first aspect; for, in prose, words are containers of thought. But poetry takes refuge in words because of the second value; words, in poetry, are conveyors of emotion. It will then be understood why poetry, forsaking aristocratic understanding, has embraced common sympathy. And from this it will be understood why the following extracts are memorable as poetry—so much so that even a man of indifferent memory, like me, can recite them without any difficulty:

    Immemorial elms
And murmur of innumerable bees. (Tennyson)

Pathe holo deri, jhore gelo ceri,
    din gelo brithā, priyā;
tobuo tomār khomāhāśi bohi
    dekhā dilo ājeliyā. (Rabindranath Tagore)[4]

[4] I am late; the cherries have fallen, and the day is passed in vain, my love. Yet there appears the azalea, wearing your patient smile.

(There are several problems with transliterating the Bengali script. Like English, Bengali is not always pronounced as it is written; some letters are silent, and others have different phonetic values in different environments. The transcription given here and below attempts to capture the sound of Bengali rather than to reproduce the orthography.)

As cool as the wet leaves of the lily-of-the-valley
She lay beside me in the dawn. (Ezra Pound)

piṅgala bihbal bethito nabhatal. koi go koi megh? udoy hao;
śandhār tandrār muroti dhori āj mandro manthor bacono kao.
śurjer raktim nayone tumi megh dāo he kajjol, pāṛāo ghum;
briśthir cumbon bithāri cole jāo, onge harśer poṛuk dhum.
(Satyendranath Datta)[5]

Among twenty snowy mountains
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird. (Wallace Stevens)

A moment's consideration is sufficient to recognize that the association of ideas contained in these lines cannot be clearly understood by consulting dictionaries. For it is not merely literal meaning which lies at the root of the uniqueness of these words, but it is the emotion underlying them, their associations, arrangement, diverse sound-effects, and the aptness of their rhythm, which make them exquisite. These qualities, taken together, are called 'form', and each of these components of form is indispensable. The absolute union of form and content brings forth poetry. That is why poetry cannot be translated; that is why the language of poetry and the language of conversation are, by nature, different; that is why form is dominant in modern poetry. Wordsworth thought that poetry stops being artificial when the poet abandons his grandiloquence. But we find that language is only one component of form. The poet of today, therefore, is no longer satisfied with Wordsworth's counsel. He believes that the form of undefiled poetry is not like one who lives by her beauty: the relationship between form and content is lawful and permanent.

It is really impossible to make poetry free of the proper control of language. Words which are not those of a particular language, which stir emotion by meaningless sound, should be used in incantations, rather than in poetry. If the aim of

[5] The tawny sky is anxious and grieved. Where are you, O clouds, appear: speak in your deep, slow voice, disguised as evening's slumber. Put *kohl* around the reddened eyes of the sun, O clouds: give it sleep. Covered with rain-kisses, let the body be overwhelmed with joy.

poetry is to build a bridge of sympathy between the writer and the reader, then the words of poetry will always be governed by dictionaries. It is of course not my intention, by this reasoning, to cheat the poet of his perennial right to coin words; I am merely mildly suggesting that adult words are more hardy than suckling ones, and that alchemy has a deeper association of ideas than does chemistry. But as there are limitations to man's efficiency, so also the usefulness of words is not unlimited. The nature of words is like that of coins: a coin is eroded by constant use, transfer from one hand to another makes it dirty, it becomes obsolete in time, and still later it finds its place in a glass case in a museum. But possessing a place in a museum does not necessarily mean extinction; obsolete words are useful at times. An ancient coin may lose its face value, but its ornamental value increases.

The use of archaic words by experts, therefore, is no hindrance to poetry. This remark is best witnessed by the Anglo-Saxon words employed by Doughty. Moreover, what applies to dignified words of refined language is also not untrue of slang; and the modern poet, at times and because of association of ideas, extends equal treatment to all words, refined or not, old or new, indigenous or foreign. The poet has only one scale—that of relevance—to apply in matters of language, for language is a component part of form. Therefore, he has no other course but to reject the Wordsworthian theory of revolution in language. Yet, where Wordsworth, an extremist of those times, from the urgency of his self-discovered reality, said:

And now the same strong voice more near
Said cordially, 'My friend, what cheer?
Rough doing these! as God's my judge,
The sky owes somebody a grudge!
We have had in half an hour or less
A twelve months terror and distress!'

Rupert Brooke, a conservative of these times, can write in his own self-perfected language:

The damned ship lurched and slithered. Quiet and quick,
My cold gorge rose; the long sea rolled; I knew
I must think hard of something or be sick
And could think hard of only one thing—you!
Do I forget you? Retching twist and tie me,
Old meat, good meals, brown gobbets up I throw,
Do I remember? Acrid and slimy,
The sobs and slobber of a last year's woe...

From the combination of language, perception, and rhythm poetry is made. Preconceived notions about language and perception should not be entertained. Like modern youth, they do not accept the good counsel of authorities in matters of union. Since their function is to create emotion, they argue that the reintroduction of the ancient custom of *svayamvara*[6] is most necessary. Right or wrong, they have accomplished their purpose by threatening us with surrender to insincerity. Now it is the turn of metre. Now the question becomes whether, in apprehension of artificiality, the scanning of lines will be given up; and, if this is done, what will become of poetry? The problem needs detailed consideration.

But the subject is so vast that it is impossible to consider it in detail here. Here it should merely be remembered that rhythm and rhyme are not the same thing. Rhyme is a comparatively new *alamkara*[7] of poetry, but rhythm is primordial. When we were inquiring into the origin of poetry, we found that the blending of rhythm and emotion gave rise to it. That description is perhaps not entirely faultless, for in it rhythm takes the precedence due the elder; this, very possibly, is not its due. For rhythm and emotion are like twins, their mutual attraction being because of a common umbilical cord. Also, emotion and motion are diametrically opposed; in emotion, there is more rest than activity. That means that the eloquent emotions do not run, panting; rather, they move at an easy

[6] *svayamvara* was an ancient custom by which girls of royal blood could choose their own husbands, usually involving contest or trial. The usual custom, of course, is for the groom to be chosen by the parents of the bride, and vice versa.

[7] *alamkāra* is 'ornamentation', one of the major characteristics of poetry according to the classical schemes of poetics.

pace, with many pauses. This well-regulated pattern of sound and pause is, perhaps, metre; and if this definition of metre is apt, the meeting point of prose and verse is variable. Tagore's *Lipika*[8] may be mentioned as an illustration, and, it must be admitted, after reading the following excerpt, that emotional prose may also be called 'Poetry':

> ekhāne nāmlo śandhā. śurjodeb, kon deśe, kon śamudropare tomār probhāt holo?
>
> andhokāre ekhāne kempe uṭhche rajonigandhā, bāśorghorer dārer kāche abaguṇṭhitā nababodhur mato; konkhāne phuṭlo bhorobelākār kanokcāmpā?
>
> jāglo ke? nibiye dilo śandhāy-jālāno dip phele dilo rātre-gāmthā seuti phuler mālā.
>
> ekhāne eke eke dorjāy āgol porlo, śekhane jānlā gelo khule. ekhāne nouko ghāṭe bāndhā, mājhi ghumiye; śekhāne pāle legeche hāoā.[9]

If one listens, putting aside prejudices, our ears catch the ringing of an unseen metre in these lines. There is no mystery beneath this profound order: the balance has been attained by an alternating arrangement of similes and perceptions. As soon as *rajanigandha* (tuberoses) is added to *sandhya* (evening), and the scale lowers on one side, the *kanaka* (golden) *champa* of the dawn blooms forth and is weighted on the other. The moment our doubts raise the question *jaglo ke* (who awakes?), it is immediately lost in flower-offerings and incense-lights. The dream-wind touches the sail of imagination, and the boat, with its sleeping boatman, slips its mooring for an unknown destination.

If it is not improper to include this piece within the order of poetry, then we must admit that poetry can be written without any mathematical scansion, as prescribed by the rhetoricians. As a matter of fact, metre, as defined by the

[8] A collection of prose-poetry published in 1922.

[9] Here evening descends. O sun, where, beyond which sea, does your dawn begin? Here tuberoses tremble in the darkness, like a new bride on the threshold of the bridal chamber; where does dawn's golden *champa* bloom? Who wakes? And puts out the lamp that was kindled in the evening, and throws away the garland of *seuti* made in the night? Here doors close, one by one; there windows open. Here the boat is moored to the wharf, the boatmen asleep; there wind spreads the sail.

rhetoricians, is a mere mechanical skill; and often our minds become so caught up by the spinning of this merry-go-round that we fail to notice the absence of perception and emotion in poetry. Sanskrit poets managed these mechanics very well; the vast deception of Sanskrit poetry has even now not been perceived. Thus the famous lines of the lamentation of Aja create in my mind a feeling of terrible sadness, which has nothing to do with grief:

sragiyaṁ yadi jīvitāpahā
  hṛdaya kiṁ nihitā na hanti mām
viṣampyamṛtaṁ kvacid bhavet
  amṛtaṁ vā viṣamiśvarecchayā.[10]

But as soon as the illusion is over, I realize that Kalidasa resorted to this feminine prettiness only because the spontaneous stream of emotion had, by then, dried up.

The modern poet may not approve of my argument in its entirety, but he agrees with me that, as it reaches greatness, poetry retains no more relationship with numbers at all; instead, there is found in it only an enormous simplicity. As the language of poetry is the voice of reality, so its metre is reality's footfall. People may say that this is nothing new, that all great poets knew it and the metre of all living poetry is always spontaneous and devoid of self-consciousness. As a matter of fact, the adjective 'new' does not suit a true poet: he knows that that which is novel is always laughable; and that is why, instead of inventing, he applies his mind to discovering. The liberation of dying traditions from the black hole of antiquated custom is his object; his intent is to restore the right of self-determination to poetry. As the essence of poetry is very real to him, he easily understands that Shakespearean blank verse is not dependent upon scholarly scouring, and that the rules and prohibitions of nervously perspiring literary critics cannot be applied to the following, which is a just and true portrayal of Lear's violent emotions:

[10] If this garland which takes away life is placed in my heart, why doesn't it kill me? Someplace, even poison would be nectar, or nectar would be poison, according to the wish of God.

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once,
That make ungrateful man!

Thanks to supersensory hearing we are aware of an unspoken equilibrium even in these disconnected ravings, and by its blessing the following lines from D. H. Lawrence appear as metrical composition:

No, now I wish the sunshine would stop
and the white shining houses, and the gay red flowers on the balconies,
and the bluish mountains beyond, would be crushed out
between two valves of darkness;
the darkness falling, the darkness rising, with muffled sound
obliterating everything.
I wish whatever props up the walls of light
would fall, and darkness come hurling heavily down,
and it would be thick black dark for ever.
Not sleep, which is grey with dreams,
nor death, which quivers with birth,
but heavy sealing darkness, silence, all immovable.
What is sleep?
It goes over me, like a shadow over a hill,
but does not alter me, nor help me.
And death would ache still, I am sure;
it would be lambent, uneasy.
I wish it would be completely dark everywhere,
inside me, and out, heavily dark,
utterly.

If this correlation of emotion and rhythm is not imaginary, then preconceived notions regarding metre, like rash ideas of language, are inexcusable. In fact, the best course is to allow emotion to find its own metre. Here also the only test is that of relevance; and all free verse, though the ear does

not respond to the good advice of the *sastras*[11] on mathematics, is, like the last two quotes, smooth-surfaced and profoundly tied together by self-supported rules. Of course, there is a world of difference between spontaneity and disorderliness; and since metre follows the footsteps of emotion, the drive of excessive emotion may make metre break its confines; whereas, emotion in search of a proper receptacle may find a metre with which the prosodist has no quarrel. For example,

When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smoothes her hair with automatic hand
And puts a record on the gramophone.

Here, in the middle of the self-controlled, unadorned, natural metre of *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot has suddenly with these four old lines disclosed the story of a shameful love-affair of modern times. A little reflection makes it clear that the metre employed in these lines is inevitable. The first line is taken from *The Vicar of Wakefield.* There Goldsmith had used it to describe the erring of his light-hearted heroine. Moreover, in going from hand to hand over the past two hundred years, its original flavour[12] has evaporated, and it has been reduced to insipid tastelessness. The moment I read this line, therefore, my mind, at least, becomes overwhelmed with the sapless insubstantiality of the sentimental courtship of modern love-affairs; and the harsh meaningless termination of all this great preparation, pictured in the next three lines, shatters me. In the codified precision of these lines, I see an unconcerned, foolish woman in the ruined bridal chamber, pacing to and fro, for nothing. And the word 'gramophone', awakened by a sudden knock of rhyme, goes on saying with ceaseless arrogance that the main incentive of this insignificant playlet is as mechanical as its voice, as meaningless as the pleasure it gives.

[11] Texts which regulate activities ranging from ritual to the gaining of wealth to architecture.

[12] The term used is *rasa*, which is literally 'taste, juice, flavour'. In the context of Sanskrit poetics, however, it implies a great deal more; it is the essence of a work of art, and the impersonalized, abstract aesthetic pleasure that one gets from the work.

If this specimen of self-possessing rhythm is put beside Pope's translation of Homer, the reason that the modern poet is reluctant to cast poetry in the mould of customary practice becomes evident. He believes that poetry is like a crystal as described by science: given the opportunity, it can find its own form; but a jar from outside only causes decomposition within. This remark does not suggest any super-reality; and although the modern poet acknowledges inspiration, by inspiration he means reward for labour. It may well be asked here: When poetry is self-created, by what impertinence does the poet ask for a reward? The answer is that poetry is self-created in the sense that a tree is self-grown. Perhaps once it used to reach up its arms towards the sky for the simple pleasure of growth. But that kind of primitive fertility no longer exists in this world. Now, unless one searches throughout the universe gathering seeds, he cannot generate the wish-yielding tree[13] of poetry. Then, after much nursing, perhaps the sprout appears; but the poet cannot breathe easily even then. It is still incumbent upon him to protect this laboured growth with vigilant care. And in return for this extraordinary self-sacrifice, the poet wants nothing more than that the everlasting banyan-tree of poetry save him from the scorching heat, and that it extend the same hospitality to all who would take refuge there.

In trying to save time and space, I have simplified the process of the disillusionment of the modern poet, which, really, is not so simple. His progress, in fact, has been as uneven as the decline and rise of the Israelites. Time and again, the way to his promised land has lost itself in barren deserts, become oblivious of its destination in the enchantment of peopled lands, followed demons rather than gods. He was so confounded, when he staggered out of the stifling tavern of the symbolists, that he could not distinguish between an ant-hill and a mountain. And as soon as he sobered up, he thought that the triumphant pictorial qualities of the imagists were

[13] The term is *kalpataru*, and the reference is to one of the mythical trees in Indra's heaven which fulfils all desires.

perhaps far richer in content than the unhealthy sentimentality of the symbolists. But then, pictures of perceptions are not living; though the outline of the figures had clarity, there was no suggestion of flesh and blood; and so the novel classics of idolators like H. D. quickly drowned themselves in songs imitative of Georgian ballads. Meanwhile, the Great War had broken out; folk songs were no longer audible in the uproar of frantic destruction; even the conservatives could not but admit that there are other kinds of fields than the tilled ones of the farms, where ploughs do not move, where shells and bullets draw furrows of death. The following poem of Owen is, perhaps, the foremost and greatest example of such a realization:

Move him in the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved—still warm—too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

Here was the beginning of the sought-after simplicity. But the fiery ordeal of the modern poet was even then yet to end; he had still to realize that peace could be more hopeless, more lonely, more dangerous, than war. The final curtain on his comedy of errors fell recently; nothing is left of his self-centred impertinence; his humbled pen can easily write, today:

These fought in any case,
and some believing,
                    prodomo, in any case...

Some quick to arm,
some for adventure,
some from fear of weakness,
some from fear of censure,
some for love of slaughter in imagination,
learning later...
some in fear, learning love of slaughter;

Died some, pro patria,
non 'dolce', non 'et decor'...
walked eye-deep in hell
believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving
came home, home to a lie,
home to many deceits,
home to old lies and new infamy!
usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places.

Daring as never before.
Young blood and high blood,
fair cheeks, and fine bodies;
fortitude as never before,
frankness as never before,
disillusion as never told in old days,
hysterias, trench confessions,
laughter out of dead bellies. (Ezra Pound)

But was this the land he sought?

I have spoken at some length about the endeavours of the modern poet; now let us measure his success. I firmly believe that he has produced great poetry. Perhaps he will not rank with Shakespeare; but that is not for want of excellence, but is due to a difference in kind. There is no doubt, of course, that most poets today are contemporary, not modern. The blame for this is due not only to our own times; even in the poetry of older times, the sands were hotter than the sun. A serious complaint against the best modern poetry is however true: poetry today is obscure. But there are two sides to this difficulty: the reader's, and the poet's. It is unjust to blame the poet for an incomprehension which has its origin in the

reader's indolence. Enthusiasm, concentration, and practice are required for entrance into any branch of the arts, not to speak of philosophy, science, and mathematics. If the poet demands the same kind of respect and concentration for his field, his demand is certainly justified. But the obscurity which originates in want of sympathy, at the root of which is, to some extent, the poet's uncertainty and self-doubt, may be partly the result of a period of transition; but for the rest of it the poet himself is responsible.

I have shown before that poetry is immortal when its inquiry leads it beyond uncertainty to empirical truth. This elevation is rare in modern poetry; and I, at least, do not have such faith that it will ever succeed in achieving this. Because the simple formula of life has taken on a form so abstruse and tortuous in these five thousand years that elementary simplicity is, quite naturally, absent from it. And, as our knowledge does not decrease, but increases every day, the undistortedness of the former way of looking at the world is inconceivable today. The knowledge of our times is destructive: it has revealed the casual foundations of the pillars of human fame in such a way that we have now naturally lost respect for the so-called time-honoured truth. The wish-yielding tree of poetry today, therefore, is no longer firmly rooted, like a banyan, to the earth; like rhododendrons that grow on the mountain, it expands in the rarefied air and its body therefore is knotty, its growth stunted, with no shadow beneath it, nor any fruit on its branches; it oscillates for no reason and bears flowers —cruel, bloody flowers.

Even if the inevitable shallowness of modern poetry is admitted, the great sacrifice of the modern poet cannot be condemned. Let us not forget that the day he started his pilgrimage, the triumphant cries of the world rang behind him, and before him loomed the reward of success and the assurance of safety. Then the applause gradually dissipated itself; it turned out that the success was an optical illusion. Unable to resist the temptation of the wayside inns, his fellow-travellers had left his company; darkness had descended, and

there was no guiding star. Yet he has moved on; he has not taken time to catch his breath; he has not feared the impending danger; he did not dream that with every step his way back was disappearing. He has not indulged in sentimentality, in the hope of emotion; he has flayed himself, to witness the *lila*[14] of life to the full; he has torn out roots full of love, thinking that they obstructed the way to final excellence. Meanwhile, he has finished circumambulating the circle of progress; there is nowhere to move forward; perhaps the next step is death. Yet he does not want to stop; his perseverance has not reached its limit; his feet are not tired. It is as if, as a reward for his extraordinary sacrifice, he only wants to feel a little that, in this hollow illusion, his creations are more insubstantial still:[15]

kankone thāndāy holo āmāder jātrā—
bhramonta biśom dirgho, śamoyta śab ceye khārāp,
rāstā ghorālo, dhārālo bātāser coṭ,
ekebāre durjoyo śit.
uṭgulor ghāre khot, pāye bethā, mejāj coṛā,
tārā śue śue poṛe galā barophe.
mājhe mājhe jāy bigoṛe
jakhon mone poṛe pāhārtolite basantomonjil, tār cātāl,
ār sarboter peyālā hāte reśomi śāje jubotir dol.
edike uṭ-oālārā gāl pāṛe, gangan kore rāge,
chuṭe pālāy mad ār meye khomje.
mośāl jāy nibe, māthā rākhbār jāygā joṭe nā.
nagore jāy, śekhāne boiritā, nagorite sandeho,
g[illegible]lo nongrā, tārā coṛā dām hāmke.
kothin muśkile poṛa gelo.
śeś kāle thāorālem colbo sārā rāt,
mājhe mājhe nebo jhimiye,
ār kāne kāne keu gān geye jābe—
e-śamostoi pāglāmi.

bhorer dike elem, jekhāne mithe śit śei pāhāṛer khode,
śekhāne barophśimār nicetā bhijebhije, ghono gāch-gāchālir gandho.

[14] *Līlā* is a term which is most often translated something like 'amorous sport', with reference to Krishna's love-play with the cowherd girls of Vrindavana, according to the Vaishnava tradition. Its meaning is much more general, however, referring to divine activity which seems to man, with his limited insight, random; this activity has ultimate meaning and pattern that cannot be perceived by us.

[15] This is Rabindranath Tagore's translation of T. S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*.

nodi coleche chuṭe jalojantrer cākā āmdhārke mārche cāpor.
digonter gāye tinṭe gāch dāṁriye,
buṛo śādā ghoṛāṭā māth beye douṛ diyeche.
poumcholem śorābkhānāy, tār kabāṭer māthāy āngurlotā.
cha-jon mānuś khola dorjar kache pasa khelche ṭākār lobhe,
pā diye thelche śunno mader kupo.
kono khabori millo nā śekhāne,
tāi collem āro āge.
jete jete śandhā holo;
śamoy periye jāy jāy, takhon khumje pelem jāygāṭa.
bolte pāro, bepārṭa tripti pābār mato baṭe.

mone poṛe, e-śab onek kāl āge,
ābār ghaṭe jeno ei icche, kintu likhe rākho,
ei likhe rākho, eto dure je āmāder ṭene niyechilo
śe ki jonmer śandhāne, nā mrittur.
jonmo ekṭa hoyechilo niścito,
pramān peyechi, śandeho nei.
er āge to jonmoo dekheci, mrittuo,
mone bhābtem tārā ek noy.
kintu ei je janmo e baṛo kathor,
dārun er jātonā, mrittur mato, āmāder mrittur mato.
elem āmrā phire āpon āpon deśe, ei āmāder rājattoguloy.
kintu ār śasti nei śei purano bidhāner moddhe
jekhāne ache śab anāttiyo tāder deb-debi āmkore dhore.
ār-ekbār morte pārle āmi bāmci.

1930

The Emancipation of Metre and Rabindranath

Herbert Spencer, trying to distinguish between prose and verse, is supposed to have said that the difference between the two ways of writing is based solely on the printer's whim: a page of printed prose has a uniform margin on four sides, while verse has uneven edges. I am not a scientific person, which is probably why an original explanation of this sort does not remove my ignorance but sets me laughing. But however obvious the differences between the two modes are to me, to this day I have not been able to discern any natural antagonism between prose and verse, but rather have often thought that it is the confluence of those two streams that is known as the pilgrimage of literature; and though this opinion seems exaggerated at first, yet agreement with it is only a matter of time. For certainly even lovers of prose must have seen that when the appeal of a particular piece of writing eludes the vigilance of the intellect and knocks right against the inner apartments of their hearts, it can be hardly distinguished from poetry; and the lover of poetry too shares a similar experience: very often he comes across a poem which, though full of rime, rhythm, simile and alliteration, has not a jot of poetry in it, and through the royal trappings of which the prosaic poverty of daily drudgery peers every moment.

I spend all these words to indicate that at the feast of artistic pleasure there are no differences of caste among the invited: there prose and verse have equal rights, the only points that need be considered about those who seek admission being their generosity, emotional depth and sense of cause and effect; and since literature is mainly the reflection of life itself, it seems to me that we may easily find in life examples of that union between prose and verse which we see in literature. One of

Molière's heroes was amazed to hear that he had been speaking prose all his life without knowing it; and the number of times in a year that even ordinary beings like us speak in poetry through the urges of emotion would really make a surprising figure. This, however, does not establish a prose-verse identity; and perhaps all civilized men have always continued to acknowledge the separate entities of the two. As far as I can remember, there is no language which has only one word to designate the two; and since I do not believe that the Word is Brahman but understand that like other tools which serve human requirements language too has been forged by necessity, I must admit that it is because there is a straightforward semantic difference between the two terms that they are designated by different verbal symbols.

On the other hand, however self-reliant prose and verse may generally be, there remains no scope for this clear-cut separation when they have the responsibility of artistic creation on their shoulders. The joint business which they then start by putting together all the capital they have between them is given the name of poetry by society; and nobody disputes today that poetry is the purest state of the human consciousness. In other words, one is forbidden to argue about the object that is recognized through the medium of poetry; and though a formula like 'Not this, not this' is the verbal expression of that knowledge, yet its centre is not negative but is the source of a very positive realization. Hence the thing that is obtained from poetry is often ineffable but never unknowable; and though these words may at first sound like the exaggerations of mystics, yet in practice all of us are more or less acquainted with the matter. In fact most magicians show their tricks in this way; and like the descendants of Vyasa and Valmiki the disciples of *Bhanumati*[1] too manage to conceal their conventional sleights-of-hand so completely behind music or continuous oratory that the fascinated spectator thinks himself to be facing an unearthly mystery. For the rapt attention that is created in the mind of the reader or the spectator by means of

[1] Various conjuring tricks are ascribed to a princess of this name.

well-organized sound is like a state of dream; and as this state is characterized by a complete surrender of one's volition, an immense power to accept command and counsel, it is by inducing such a condition that the snake-charmer brings the snake under his control and the hypnotist cures the patient suffering from hysteria.

However, the old characteristic of a command which is to be obeyed must be present here as well; that is to say, here too it is absolutely essential for the person who is commanding to have self-confidence and for the commands to have lucid certainty. The prose portions of poetry are occupied with this task of making things clearly known, while verse takes the responsibility of creating the state of rapt attention referred to above. If in real life a line like 'Cover her face, mine eyes dazzle, she died young' suddenly strikes our ears all by itself, without anything before or after, it may sound like the raving of a madman. But when unappreciative people evade the curious power of this line and just laugh, they forget that Webster did not get away with merely arranging those words in their present sequence, but in order to make that particular line ring as unerring as an oracle, he had to create a fascinating surge in the preceding verse. Shakespeare's method is also like this: in him too page after page, scene after scene, is spent in this preparation; and after that, when the reader's mind is hypnotized by those magnificent undulations of sound, there comes the irrevocable countermand of the poet: 'Absent thee from felicity awhile.' At that stage the reader has lost the power of raising objections; and in that condition those trivial words seem to him to be as primal as the sacred syllable *Om*;[2] no longer can he help thinking that with Hamlet's final exit the curtain falls, not for a few days only but for ever, on the stage of his own well-being as well.

Though the creation of sounds is mainly the task of verse, it is not to be supposed that prose is entirely deprived of that

[2] The mystical symbol of Brahman in the *Upanishads:* 'often=amen; used in invocations, at the commencement of prayers, at the beginning and end of Vedic recitation, and as a respectful salutation; the subject of many mystical speculations': A. A. Macdonell, *A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary.*

wealth. The two, however, are not equal in the sphere. In verse sound is usually well-organized and composed of equal metrical units; but prose is everywhere full of variety, its rise and fall obeying no regulations except those of sense. Certainly it cannot be said that prose is entirely unharmed by the nature of this freedom; but in spite of this there is no doubt that its figures of profit far outrun its losses. For however honoured nonsense may be in the world of science today, so far it is sense that the fine arts seek; and since it is dominated by meaning, prose, though born after verse, is now superior to its elder in power and possibilities. Of course even today the uses of verse have not been entirely dispensed with: in the shadowy kingdom of emotions it is verse which is still the leader; and the rare occasions on which prose, driven by the restlessness of youth, happens to trespass on the boundaries of this territory, it has to abide by the advices of its elder in respect of the manners of the place. But where it is description that is sought and information that is required, where the dispelling of doubts is the only motive and the distance between the speaker and the listener so great that the very dream of intimacy is a mockery, where penetration is impossible and notification alone possible, it is natural that the predominance of prose will increase at a rapid rate.

The Creator did not shape the world into one layer. Its original principle may perhaps be known only through the celestial vision that rapt meditation brings; but this means that the upper layers are numerous rather than unknowable. Hence those who think with Aristotle that the ideal of poetry is the mirror of life itself must make room for the gross stanzas in that reflected image; and if the natures of prose and verse are really altogether different, poetry of that sort, entirely faithful to life, may never be shaped out of pure prose or pure verse: for that we shall need a carrier who does not discriminate and may move at pleasure from prose to verse and from verse to prose. It is this particular vessel of poetry, made from a mixture of metals, that is called free rhythm or 'free verse.' Both old wine and new wine may be mixed in it at will and yet one

need not fear that the vessel will burst. On special occasions this rhythm may be made to dance like a dervish according to the rules of verse, while in a changed situation even the irregular gait of prose is not unseemly in it. Certainly it has not adopted the ascetic's garb, but it would be wrong to think that it does not occasionally don saffron[3] robes. On many occasions, however, I have also seen that its body is so burdened with ornaments that not an inch of it remains exposed.

Its voice rings clearly with the strong, healthy utterance of *The Ordinary Girl*,[4] and the generosity of *Universal Grief*[5] suits it equally well. *The Boy*[6] frisks on its ample road, while the travellers in their *Pilgrimage to the Child*[7] march forward on it in a procession. In its yard, even by the frontiers of its 'black earth rusted in places' crowd the 'red peak-ranges like the disastrous puckerings of angry Rudra's eyebrows.' In brief, in its 'roaring and singing, tempestuous dancing and liquid rhythm' we may hear 'the silence of eternity and the restlessness of the current age.' The easy variety of language gives power to this rhythm, so that among its thousand acts of licence it only has to ensure that the beats of its feet tally with the steps of language. This is perhaps why it has more similarities with prose, though it is not at loggerheads with verse. I have already said that I do not consider the place of verse in everyday life to be very trivial. Hence even on free rhythm the influence of verse is considerable. In fact we are even compelled to admit that the kind of prose used in it is not at all the prose of worldly usage. For however common the theme of a poem may be, there is always the spring of an uncommon emotion at its bottom; and since speech born of emotion is exalted speech, the language of free verse too is not the language of domesticity but the language of a man's uplifted consciousness.

[3] The colour symbolizing renunciation of worldly life, worn by ascetics and monks.

[4] =*Sadharan Meye*.

In this paragraph and once towards the end of the essay Datta interweaves the meanings of Tagore titles into his sentences. To be consistent I have translated all the titles in the body of the essay and have given the original names in the notes. (translator)

[5] *Bishwashok*.

[6] *Chheleta*.

[7] *Shishutirtha*.

Perhaps many will be annoyed to read this laudation of free verse, and pointing out that this bisexual figure is the gift of very modern art, will ask whether in the long history of literature poetry has not become the symbol of life on any other occasion. In reply one has to admit that the moderns have not been able to go anywhere near the fullness with which the ancient poets depicted life in their poetry. Of course the modern writers have little regret for this incompleteness; and it is also not unreasonable to suppose that life has in the meantime grown so multiple that it is almost impossible to portray it in one work, even through the combined efforts of several arts. But though to some extent the modern writers are to blame for this, their methods are really innocent; and in a comparative consideration the techniques of the older poetry and of free verse are seen to be similar in their purposes in many respects. However, the world never stands still, what is now moss becoming in time a mighty tree; and when unconscious evolution can produce such a result, we should not be surprised if after the conscious quest of so many years the lineaments of modern poetry should change somewhat.

The essence of literature is in truth still unchanged; and the freedom which the thinkers of this age are claiming on behalf of poetry is not against tradition. Poets of the past were not any the less active than poets of present times in declaring rebellion against worn out conventions; and every student of English knows the extent of humiliation which the first Elizabethan dramatists, including Shakespeare, had to suffer for that. But even this did not diminish their alacrity, and they understood in spite of it that it was more necessary to have living dramas than to have the conventional Unities of Time, Place and Action. Even with regard to metre our attitude is like theirs. Of course at that time a mixture of prose and verse within the same poem was not accepted as it is today. But even in these revolutionary days it is impossible to imitate the generous reconciliation that used to be effected without effort, within the same scene and the speech of the same character, between elegant language and correct metre on the one hand

and vulgar language and incorrect metre on the other; and though in the lyrics of that time one does not find the freedom of these days, yet the ancients did not look upon metre as an imprisonment but recognized in it a method of poetic inspiration.

Elizabethan poetry, at least, never wore the fetters of arithmetic, Milton being the first to come under its sway. Hence when we meet his figure standing at the confluence of two ages, our minds seem to sadden without any apparent cause; the fear of an unknown confinement makes us want to leave such a great poet and seek the company of a rustic poet like Herrick. Though the intellect humbly admits that it is Milton who knows the message of the lost Paradise, yet the heart seeks the open air of Marvell's flower-garden, where the arts of the mortal woman blended with the odours of the soil have glorified this dusty earth above heaven. I know that it is both ridiculous and arduous to depreciate Milton; and that is not at all what I am trying to do. If, without mentioning his brilliant genius and incomparable success, we look only at the unending list of people indebted to him, even then we realize his greatness; and that debt is so widespread that even Bengali literature could not escape it. But I shall certainly be forgiven if I say that for a materialist like me a comfortable excursion in the rarefied atmosphere of the heights of his poetic ideal is necessarily brief.

In the undisturbed seriousness of Milton's poetry there is no room for human weakness; the self-confident finality of the moralist's attitude stands for ever at its centre; and God Himself is one of its aristocratic protagonists. Hence it is not in any way easy for a mortal to enter the theatre where the Miltonic tragedy is staged. Of course in the opinion of many people it is an unearthly elevation that is the principal feature of an epic. But I cannot agree with them; and though what they say may not be entirely false, it is certainly partial. At least the two epics with which I am familiar, the *Mahabharata* and the *Iliad*, present a perspective where there is no trace of the Miltonic holiness; and although it will not be proper for

me to make any comments on the language and metre of these two poems, inasmuch as their messages have reached me mainly through translations, yet perhaps nobody would today dispute the fact that the two ancient poets were not keen on rejection but were eager to accept.

They too did not deliberately exclude gods and goddesses from their poetry, but rather wrote of a more distant past when the most trivial of mundane affairs did not escape the notice of the immortal authorities. However, in the matter of translation it has been seen that when the speeches and retorts of those superhuman visitors are rendered into metrical verse and an elegant language, they sound somewhat cheap. Yet when the unimpeded foot of the current colloquial language touches the limbs of the woman of stone, at once the frigidity of all the years dissolves[8] and we realize that though eternal beauty may sometimes sleep, it never dies. Moreover, this truth is not the realization of the translators of the *Iliad* only: whoever has wanted to render ancient poetry into another language has had a similar experience; and in the sixteenth century, before the English language had become rigid and correct, the art of translation in that country had reached a level of excellence which far surpasses what the English of today, with their vastly increased linguistic knowledge, have achieved in the field. One may therefore reasonably conclude that words which are now barred from everyday use on account of the excess of their semantic glory and carefully preserved in the museum of the dictionary as specimens of culture did not have all this ceremonial air about them in their active days. For distance always glorifies; and even though a modern may look upon the language of the *Mahabharata* and similar books as faultless, yet any assumption that it was burdened with hyper-correctness in the eyes of contemporaries should in all probability be rejected.

However that may be, poetry, which had thriven on improper conduct for such a long time, suddenly gave up its

[8] In an episode in the *Ramayana* Ahalya, who had been turned into stone by her husband's curse, was revived by the touch of Rama's left foot.

lawlessness in the beginning of the seventeenth century; and it is not fair to blame Milton for this change of manner, for in truth he was merely the occasion. The emergence of a so-called classical ideal after the excesses of the Elizabethan age was not only natural but also inevitable. Moreover, in the intervening period, division of labour in the literary field had also advanced a great deal: through Dryden's industrious efforts constricted English prose attained such a wonderful degree of sensitivity that there was no longer any point in regarding verse as all-powerful, and it was seen that many duties like arguing, story-telling and teaching which we, having no other alternative, had so far managed to do in verse with considerable difficulty, might be accomplished very easily and gracefully through the medium of prose. Further, just at this time the more material side of life was opened up as well. All the new fields that had been ploughed by inquisitive men ever since the Renaissance now yielded amazing harvests; and it was realized that the discoveries of history, philosophy and science could never be brought in front of the people through the medium of verse.

In such a situation an increase in the status of prose was inevitable; and had the authors of that time been really hard-hearted and practical men, they would have, without any hesitation, relegated unusable verse, along with useless rites and incantations, to that pen of oblivion where old and infirm cattle are sent. But they could not afford to be as ungrateful as all that: at last they decided that for this superannuated servant of civilization retirement would be best, for otherwise its inept interference with daily life would only create confusion. Yet even after this, the rank of the leader of ceremonial processions on festive occasions as well as the high seat of the chief priest in rituals were reserved for it; and I believe that the wide diffusion of the printing-press was in part responsible for this decision. As long as printing-offices had not spread to lanes and alleys, and literary manuscripts used to be confined to libraries alone, the sovereignty of poetry had not created any trouble, inasmuch as the men who had so long been dealing

with it were mostly specialists, familiar with the tradition of poetry, aware of its weaknesses and well-versed in the art of reading poetry.

The men who now started to crowd round it had no patience for detailed discussion; literature provided entertainment for their leisure; and since in that age leisure did not increase in the same proportion as temptations, they did not have time to make the author's implicit intentions direct and explicit, and thought neatness of decoration to be the mark of excellence. In the evil company of readers and especially imitators of this category freedom easily degenerates into licence. Hence alarmed poets got ready to make poetry fit in with rules. Thus was built the discipline of the heroic couplet; the banished Unities of Time, Place and Action re-entered the theatre; and critics declared that the only way for tragedy to preserve its status was the self-immolation of the hero and the heroine behind regal ostentation. Immediately the language of poetry took on itself the garb of seriousness, so that the public might know, on the very first hearing, that in a society of established tastes the slightest tendency towards laxity was punishable.

Unfortunately, in spite of all this, what was desired was not attained, the pious intentions producing quite contrary results. Perhaps corrective reformation is opposed to the nature of poetry. At least this is certain that after Dryden and Pope even the only too fertile soil of English poetry remained barren for a long time; and those who overcame their inertia through the urge for self-expression courted prose. Of course even then one or two eccentrics like Blake did not stop creating trouble, but the savants of the time were not perturbed by it, and thinking their impertinence to be madness, forgave them. And today even the greatest romantic will admit that though the colleagues were wrong in their opinions on the poetic powers of those men, yet the contemporary suspicion that their minds were somewhat wildly excited was not entirely baseless. In spite of all this, it was the madmen who finally won; and the upholders of decorum could not withstand the force of the deluge of blood which swept over France in the last phase of

the eighteenth century: before sinking they realized that if the ignored barbarians got really maniacal, not only would they be unable to escape, but the Creator of the universe Himself would not be spared.

As a result the glory of Collins surpassed the reputation of Pope; Wordsworth proclaimed the spoken language to be the adornment of poetry; and the aristocratic Byron set off on his conquests with the rustic proverb of Burns inscribed on the flag of his chariot. Soon the demand for prose decreased and the popularity of verse increased again; optimists loudly declared that in poetic wealth the nineteenth century would outshine even the Elizabethan age; and as though in punishment for their vanity, the death occurred at the age of only twenty-six of a poet who, though not Shakespeare's equal, is just below him in rank. After this, poetry could not be kept under control. Spoilt by an uninterrupted good time, poets once again started getting unruly: in spite of officiating as a priest in the remarriage of prose and verse, Browning was not excommunicated; Tennyson attempted to write poetry in a rural language; and Swinburne himself was forced to admit that Whitman, the father of prose poetry, was not a rebel but the saviour of moribund poetry.

Of course at that time England did not understand the true greatness of that pioneer of free verse; nor does she do so even today. Before long Swinburne corrected his mistake by withdrawing his words of fervent praise. But a remarkable novelty appeared in the ideals of the poets who came after Swinburne; and if the poetry written by the members of the 'Rhymers' Club' founded by Yeats was free from the sinful touch of prose, it was equally free from the sentimental verbosity of Swinburne. Notwithstanding the ridicule of the conservatives they declared that poetry was not so much to be read as to be heard; and through this unusual ideal not only was the close connection between poetry and the people acknowledged, but the rigid technicality which is the inevitable consequence of written literature also disappeared, yielding place to revivified poetry, once more sincere, clear, self-dependent; and it was

evident that poetry fit to be recited could not bear the burden of ornaments.

Hence the natural sonic variety of language tore open metrical fastenings and demanded freedom; allegory was done away with and the quest for the direct object began; the endless surprise that comes of unfamiliarity with something yielded to the satisfaction that comes of familiarity. Of course in spite of this the last poets of the nineteenth century could not achieve the emancipation of rhythm; that took fifteen to twenty years more. Yet, on reading the new injunctions which Symons, even after the premature death of these revolutionary leaders, introduced into English poetry on the strength of French examples, no one could any longer doubt that a change was imminent. What happened after that is not yet an event of history but is within the scope of current partialities. Modern poetic efforts are still in the stage of experiment; and it would be certainly foolish to be assured about its future. However, one fact seems to be already recognized: poetry and freedom are not opposed but are closely related, and if one sets oneself to the task with a spirit of detachment, it is possible, even through anarchy, to enter that world of poetry where dualities are resolved.

I do realize that my strange hypothesis about the nature of poetry will not be proved by the example of English literature alone. It is beyond my powers to call other literatures to come and bear me witness; but I cannot rid myself of a blind conviction that all Western poetry will corroborate me. The East is of course different; and here man's highest intelligence is immersed in spiritual speculation. As a result poetry is here either an insubstantial material for entertainment or a receptacle of philosophy. Hence where our entertainments have been hindered by the fear of the arrival of something new and unknown, the poet has not received the slightest patronage; and when moral advice has seemed substantial, we have not shown the slightest curiosity for the bearer of such advice. Such an environment is an obstacle to the creation of great art. For in the accounts of fine art, as in all other accounts of life, only

zero remains when the debits and credits have been balanced against each other. Yet from what I know and have heard I have begun to suspect that even Oriental indifference is no longer rigid.

The abolition of conventions has brought disaster to all spheres of Chinese life, but that blow has revived rather than killed Chinese poetry; and I believe that the experience of Japanese literature is not different from this. I am not acquainted with the various regional literatures of India, not even indirectly; it would therefore be unseemly for me to hold any opinions on the subject. Yet from the amount and heat of controversy in Bengali periodicals it is natural to conclude that though this country[9] may have been avoided by the Pandavas in their travels, it is not outside of Time. Of course Bengali poetry did not need too many upheavals, as it never had too much of convention-ridden narrowness. However, it is difficult to ascertain how much this air of vulgar licence was voluntary and how much compulsory. It seems to me that as Bengali prose was non-existent before the nineteenth century local metrists had to allow unfettered motion to verse. Otherwise one has to assume that the people who did not hesitate to hide their erotic fires behind the Deity for fear of losing the respect of society obeyed the injunctions of self-government only in the field of metre, a difficult assumption.

Like other Oriental literatures Bengali literature too is very scantily influenced by life; but when we remember its ancestress, even this meagre contact seems sufficiently surprising. For Bengali literature originated in the shadow of Sanskrit literature, which takes pride in the very fact that its language is the language of the gods, i.e. not a human tongue. According to anthropology poetry is but evolved incantation; and one may give credence to this conclusion after observing just one case, the systematic ritualism of Sanskrit metrics. At times, listening to a few metres like the *arya*, one may be irresistibly misled into thinking that even the Sanskrit poets did not have boundless patience. But that mirage is short-lived; the slightest

[9] i.e., Bengal.

attention reveals that even the apparent ease of *arya* is part of a rigid technique. It is like the parade of well-drilled soldiers, where from time to time there are periods of slackness attained through much effort and perfectly ordered. The director makes signs from behind, whereupon the obedient dancers break their ranks in previously rehearsed modes and endeavour to create variety through methods they have been taught.

It is true that the Creator did not ordain such a miserable fate for the Bengali, but nor was it a mean danger into which the Bengali Muse fell, having drunk the lotus-honey of the metre *payar*. However, the goddess probably possessed an endless store of merit, which is why one day, all of a sudden, a new iconoclast, egged on by foreign preachers, arrogantly entered the temple and put a bonnet on the patroness of the arts. And such was the virtue of the garb that at once waves of exotic wantonness came to the inanimate body of the stone goddess. Unfortunately the influence of Milton on Michael was not meagre; and as the treatment of that doctor is not the best method to cure the malaise of ailing poetry, Michael stopped after making his verse unrimed, not realizing that it is impossible to write true poetry unless the language is down to earth. Yet it must be admitted in Michael's favour that in the matter of language he was never indifferent in his attitudes. The bookish Bengali of his time sounded unusable to him; and if, in his search for a living language, he did at last take refuge in Sanskrit lexicons, it will not do to just call *him* partial: the strait poverty of unsanskritized Bengali must also be admitted.

It is, of course, unnecessary to be ashamed of that poverty or to regret it; for when, on the day of the conquest of Lanka, the squirrel, stigmatized by the contempt of so many centuries, shook the dust off its body and filled the holes in the bridge spanning India and Lanka, it did not strike us by its humble state but surprised us by its concealed vitalizing power.[10]

[10] The squirrels' help, however small, was essential to Rama for the passage of his troops between India and Ceylon, for they filled with sand all the holes in the bridge and thus strengthened it. 'Then came hordes of squirrels and leapt into the sea. They rolled in sand and shook it off on the bridge. All the gaps they filled. The warlike Hanuman, who was always walking to and fro, dragged the squirrels away and threw them on all sides. Weeping, they complained to Rama, "Lord,

Moreover, it has also to be remembered that Michael belonged to the first age of English education, when to be an alien in one's own country was the height of intellectual excellence. Hence one may reasonably suspect that although Michael loved the Bengali language, he did not understand its nature; and so he is only a servant of the Bengali Muse, not her saviour. Everybody may not agree with this, but at least it would be admitted by all that it is less foreign to think of Bengali as born of the clan of Sanskrit than to regard the Bengali syllabic metre as intrinsically based on three morae. However, this discussion is irrelevant here; and it is not my intention to seek out Michael's faults. I know that not only is he unrivalled as a pilot, but also he is a great poet, in spite of the fact that a considerable portion of his gigantic poetic genius remained unexpressed on account of his deficiency in strength of character. And as long as Bengali poetry will find sympathizers, there will be no lack of people to sing his praise.

For Michael did not just revive moribund Bengali poetry and then drop off to sleep. It was he who rescued the Bengali poet from the groups of rival rimers who altercated in improvised songs; and though all the luminaries that appeared in the Bengali sky immediately after him were no more than twinkling sky-gazing lamps, yet the generous ovation accorded to these minor people by the Bengali intellectuals was probably the offering of Ekalavya at the feet of Drona's clay statue.[11] On the other hand, even without Michael as a pioneer, Rabindranath would probably have appeared in Bengali literature at the due time; and just as poets of his stature are born once in a hundred years, so is their coming like that of comets, self-dependent and self-accomplished. Nevertheless it

the son of Wind tramples us to death." Lord Rama called Hanuman and said, "Why do you insult the squirrels? Let everybody span the sea as best as he may." The son of Wind was ashamed to hear this. Very kind-hearted is Lord Rama. Gently he stroked the squirrels on the back. "Let no one say anything to the squirrels. Let everyone walk carefully on the bridge." ' (Krittivasa's Bengali *Ramayana*).

[11] 'Ekalavya, son of Hiranyadhanu, the King of the Nishadas, came to Drona to be his pupil, but as he was of low caste, was rejected by Drona. Ekalavya then practised the warlike arts with a clay statue of Drona in front of him, pretending it to be his preceptor.' (*Mahabharata*)

is true to say that if Michael's failures were not vivid before his eyes, most of his energy might have been whittled away in very trivial labour. This does not mean that there are countless poets in this country and elsewhere superior to Michael in original genius; and whether in pure imagination *Tara to Som*[12] is better or not than *The Parting Curse*,[13] from the point of view of psychology the first heroic lady is far more credible than Debjani. But in great poetry the excess of emotion or the abundance of inspiration is minor, the form being of major importance; and as Michael was a pioneer, he was comparatively less successful in the formal aspect.

In his later life Rabindranath has more than once apologized for his adolescent unfairness to Michael, but has never freely acknowledged his own debt to him, as he has with reference to Biharilal; and the explanation for this laconism is perhaps in the fact that his relation with the latter is comparable only to the relation between the lamp and the moth. That is to say, in the culmination of Tagore's *matrachhanda* metre the very existence of Biharilal has evaporated; but such complete disappearance is unthinkable in the case of Michael; and when his *aksharavritta* metre seems inimitable to Rabindranath, it not only stands apart by itself but is also useful to this day as an example of what is to be avoided. For to carry a mountain-load of one's own stuff on one's head is not the only sign of poetic powers: in aesthetics, as in economics, it is better to squander to one's heart's content than to amass; and Rabindranath must have understood at an early age that it is vain labour to try to create literature unless one can set oneself to work for others. Hence it is that the close cooperation between theme and technique that we see in his works is rare elsewhere; and the major burden in this task of harmonization has to be borne by technique.

For themes are the gifts of Fortune, which you accept or reject, there being no scope for a middle path with regard to them. And therefore, in the outward structures which support

[12] Michael Madhusudan Datta's *Somer Prati Tara*, the first poem in his *Birangana Kabya*, a series of epistles from women to men.
[13] Tagore's poem *Biday-Abishap*. Debjani is the heroine.

them, i.e., in metre, language and symbols, elasticity is essential; and here the results of the experiments of the two precursors—the results of erroneous experiments perhaps—helped to lighten Rabindranath's labour. Though the path to the truth is one, it is yet labyrinthine, where one cannot help losing one's way again and again. It is therefore extremely difficult to find out the right path, unless the wrong paths are marked with the footprints of those who have strayed into them. Of course through great luck some do step into the unique path at the very first effort. But in the case of an ever-conscious artist like Rabindranath this sort of providential favour seems somewhat unnecessary. So when we see that Rabindranath did not grope, but even in his prime youth raised Bengali literature to the level of world literature through an exquisite poem like *Chitrangada*,[14] we cannot stop at just thanking the author of *Chitrangada*, but must also salute those pre-Tagore poets whose experiments showed the true character of the Bengali language and prosody so clearly to Rabindranath's eyes.

However, I am not so mad as to think that Rabindranath was born into a capitalistic regime of poetry and became known as rich on account of his income from unearned property; and whoever is acquainted with Rabindranath's devotion to work knows what unwearied effort and ceaseless self-sacrifice produced his marvellous opulence. Maybe even those who are not poets realize how much of one's own volition and comfort one has to give up in order to attain such metrical ease as he did; and today nearly everybody would agree that the birth of genius is unthinkable unless there is a marriage between nature and human endeavour. But perhaps, in spite of all that, it is reasonable to believe that Rabindranath was not altogether omitted from Time's favour; and whether or not we have faith in astrology, we must admit that the emergence of a great poet is dependent on a suitable hour. In other words, all kinds of greatness seek favourable opportunities; and the most oppor-

[14] Named after the heroine.

tune moment for the manifestation of literary greatness is when a language is in a state of childhood.

Whatever the experts on modern times may say openly, in their minds they too must secretly agree with the masses that along the road of progress the number of great poets is steadily decreasing; and since man's intelligence and capacities are greatly increasing in other fields, any assumption that his poetic feelings alone are decaying will not hold water. Hence we cannot help thinking that the material of poetry no longer has that flexibility by means of which the vast inspirations of great poetry could assume formal shape; and those who find this conclusion strange should remember past history. One may think of Sophocles, Lucretius, Shakespeare, Goethe and possibly Kalidasa. Surely it cannot be just accidental that out of so many great poets none served an especially enriched language. When each of them appeared in the scene, his language was in the state of adolescence, the regime of the conventional had not yet begun, the senility of old age was yet unimaginable, and only a vast field of possibilities stretched in front. Yet at the same time its past could no longer be ignored; signs of its development had already been discerned; and having passed the uncertainty of dawn through many slips and errors, it had just arrived at the steady light of the morning. At this stage the coming of a great poet is both natural and desirable; and I see this cycle of events repeat itself in the birth of Rabindranath.

If, from what I have said above, anybody concludes that I am advising modern poets to sit idle and wait for opportunities, he will be mistaken. Far from thinking in such terms, I rather believe that it is an excessive attachment to its own time that is the chief enemy of modern poetry. Writers who belong to the first rank in the brilliance of their creative powers are never rare. But the degree of their vanity exceeds even that of the greatest poets; and if ever opportunities enable them to awake the respect of the contemporary reader, then the fear of losing that respect paralyzes their artistic faculties. The result is that if they have once enchanted the reader's mind through one

technique, they do not want to seek another, even when they know that old technique to be threadbare and inefficient; and in the end this very infirmity causes them to lose the favour of the ungrateful reader. Many have argued about what the form of poetry exactly is, and none have reached a definitive conclusion. Hence, instead of increasing the number of useless words on that point, only this much can be safely said: as no imaginative literature can survive without variety, it is not beneficial for poetry to neglect variety. That is to say, every good poem is suited to its time; but great poetry has an extra quality, which is beyond time.

As an opportunity comes, so it goes; hence if a great poem remains unwritten because of a lack of opportunity, the great poet must cultivate some art of resurrection through which past opportunities may be revived as necessary. It is this magical characteristic of great poetry to which I have given the name of 'variety' above. This variety is like the harmony of Western music; it definitely has a whole, undivided form, and first of all it is this that fascinates the listener. But its appeal does not end here; when after several auditions the entire formal structure imprints itself on the hearer's memory, then begins the analysis, the detailed consideration of every part, the description of the role of each instrument in the harmony, the assessment of the success of each tune. The work of art that can reach this height may lack the superficial pleasantness of temporary art, but an excellence immanent within it saves it for ever from the contempt bred of familiarity. Variety, of course, may be created in other ways as well. A streaming of the entire poetic life into various *ragas* and *raginis* on the model of Hindu music may indicate the poet's parsimoniousness but is a method approved of by history. But the good singer who will sing *Bhairabi*[15] all the day because he first became famous by singing it will doubtlessly find a steadily diminishing audience.

What I am saying may appear to be all right in writing, but unfortunately things are not as clear in reality. Even first rate poets like Wordsworth, Shelley or Tennyson did not appreciate

[15] Name of a *ragini*.

the value of variety in poetry; and their poems are therefore vehicles which never cease to carry their unimpaired personalities. Hence in spite of being equals of impersonal poets like Shakespeare in aim, ideal and intention, they have probably stopped outside the boundaries of the immortal regions, unable to cross over into the celestial world. But there have been many quarrels about the epithet 'impersonal' with regard to art. Hence I had better mention here that I am not suggesting any inhuman quality by that word, but am only speaking of that kind of work of art in which attempts to give pleasure to people are more prominent than attempts to edify them. I agree with extreme individualists that as the poet is a man, his thoughts and feelings reveal themselves in his activities as those of other men do. Nevertheless I have seen many poems where the impulse is not to give information about the poet but one of pure creation; and the play *The Tempest* can be cited as an example.

In my opinion that work is written mainly as a play; and while a positive statement to the effect that Shakespeare's current experiences have no place in it would be incredible, it is nevertheless certain that Prospero does not betray his author to the extent that *Idylls of the King* betrays Tennyson in spite of being consciously free of the influence of Tennyson's life. Consequently I am now firmly convinced that impersonality and variety are interdependent; and poetry which is not impersonal, though often charming, does not give us a taste of immortality. That is to say, the individual is always limited: however deeply rebelliousness may be ingrained in him, he must of necessity be a slave to place and time. Moreover, psychologists say that apart from a certain intense concentration personality has no other meaning. Hence it is beyond a poet's powers to collect the sustenance of literary variety from within himself; and if poetry has to be lifted into the abode of the eternal, it must be deflected from the centre: there is no other way. Of course even the world is not immeasurable; but man's powers are so trivial in quantity that even this narrow world seems endless to him; when he looks at the turning

wheel of events, he becomes so dizzy that he cannot judge whether or not the same event is returning again and again.

Hence there is relatively more variety in the work of a poet whose theme rests on the whole world instead of the individual; and since in great poetry the mode of expression is inseparably linked to the subject, the works of these great poets who are friends with the whole world betray no conventional forms in their artistic techniques. Meaningless conventions are naturally trivial to those who have been able to cast their feelings of me and mine into the sacrificial fire of poetry. It is such breaking of rules by the great that is known as poetic licence among connoisseurs; and as this practice was once given indulgence from ancient Greece to ancient India, so is it even now honoured from the modern West to the modern East. In my opinion Rabindranath too is a poet capable of using this licence; and that is why from his childhood he has urged his poetry along deserted paths of freedom. Perhaps the marvellous union of theme and style in Rabindranath's poetry is not so very remarkable, since nearly every poet worth mentioning, when he expands his theme to any extent, changes his style proportionately. The most astonishing quality of Tagore's genius is the peculiar restlessness of his technique, his endless change and ever-increasing growth.

In the works of other first rate poets a well-defined course is clearly visible; they climb a limited road to excellence; and once arrived at the destination, they no longer have any hesitation, conflict or restlessness. In Rabindranath's works this stiff satisfaction is absent; the dynamic nature of his poetry is against completeness and perfection. The success of *The Mind-born*[16] was extraordinary; and he would have got a permanent throne in Bengali literature just by virtue of that book. But when that technique arrived at *Imagination*,[17] the poet suddenly lost his interest in it; and it is difficult to understand why any established writer should deliberately turn to the sort of experiment which bore fruit in his next book, *The Momentary*.[18] Of

[16] =*Manasi*.
[17] =*Kalpana*.
[18] =*Kshanika*.

course, when I look back today, it seems that even in the treasure-holding sea of Rabindranath's works there is not another one like this centric jewel. Yet the day when his pen wrote the first poem of *The Momentary* there was no reason to think so; rather, there was every premonition of danger. So far it had been the traditional path of poetical composition that Rabindranath had traversed; and the sonorous tones which reverberate in the reader's ears after closing *Imagination* are the classical melodies of culture.

It is sheer daring for such a poet to try to capture in his rhythm the jingling of Krishnakali's[19] bangles; and only he can proceed to this ordeal by fire whose mind is free from the sin of egoism and who finds the welfare of poetry more desirable than his own advancement. But the psycho-analysis of the author of *The Momentary* is here irrelevant. Whatever mental state may have given birth to *The Momentary*, the publication of that book made it quite clear that there is no simple link between poetry and the purity of language. But doubts about metre were not removed even then. Of course it is true that with Rabindranath metre has never become a fetter but has kept time like anklets; and whether or not the metrical laxity of the adolescent poems was the result of inattention, it will certainly be universally agreed that in *Fruitless Weeping*[20] in *The Mind-born* he ignored the prosodists quite deliberately. And though for many days after that he forgot this free rhythm, yet to show how trivial the arithmetical aspect of metre was to him one may mention the penultimate stanza of *The Year's End*,[21] a compact and traditional poem. But there is a world of difference between this freedom and free verse; and so, having finished his research on the nature of language in

[19] *Krishnakali* is a very popular poem in *Kshanika*. It is the name of a flower that blossoms in the evening, generally explained as meaning Krishna-bud or Krishna's bud because of its budlike shape and likeness to Krishna's crest. But as *Krishna* means *dark*, *black*, the word can be taken to mean 'the dark bud' as well. Tagore plays on both meanings when he writes 'I call her Krishnakali (i.e., the flower of that name, Krishna's bud, or the dark bud); the village folk say she is dark.'

[20] =*Nishphal Krandan*.

[21] =*Barshashesh*.

Song Offerings,[22] he launched into an enquiry into the true nature of metre in *The Cranes*.[23]

In *The Cranes* the rhythm did not tear off all its bonds, but perhaps a total disregard of convention would have been rather risky in that book. This is because *The Cranes* soars beyond earthly limits; in that self-suspended state, without at least a distant gravitational pull, the poet's triumphant expedition might well have been his final departure from this world. But in spite of acknowledging the pull of rimes and treading with measured steps, this rhythm displayed such a fiery energy that it became quite clear that on the day of the conquest of heaven the Bengali poet would not have to worry about weapons; and the ability displayed by this rhythm in the expression of man's sublime emotions has no parallels anywhere, not even in English blank verse. In spite of keeping prose at an arm's length, this rhythm is so controlled in its characteristic gait and sonority that the surge of emotions is never lost under it; and so it is bound to be used in the composition of poetry where emotion plays a major role. Unfortunately the world is not made of emotional material only, the tyranny of things being ubiquitous; and against the background of this harsh, graceless materialism the serious decorum of *The Cranes* seems somewhat futile, making one feel that only a shrew who would not be humbled by indignities but would be able to return insults with interest could live with such a rude fellow.

In *The Fugitive*[24] Rabindranath shaped this kind of rhythm. In this even the last frigidity of metre disappeared; no preconceptions about metre were valid any more; and the distribution of pauses, freed from all artificialities, were almost entirely determined by the sense. It is true that rime still cast its spell, but the quantity of ornaments was reduced to such an extent that except with the help of pure prose no further scope for abbreviation remained. Even that stage was not far away. At the same time that he was writing *The Fugitive*, Rabindranath was obsessed with the composition of poetry in pure prose.

[22] =*Gitanjali*.
[23] =*Balaka*.
[24] =*Palataka*.

These were published in the first part of *Inscription.*[25] But as soon as that book was published it became clear that Herbert Spencer had not been altogether lying: though many make the mistaken assumption that a peacock and a raven with peacock-feathers are the same, yet the true identity of poetry in the guise of prose eludes all. Even the mind of the poet himself may not be completely free from doubt with regard to this book; because in the index to his works its name is listed as prose. But wherever their place may be with regard to structure and genre, pieces like *Foot-path*[26] or *Night and Morning*[27] reveal their poetic nature the moment they are read out aloud; how profoundly different they are from other prose works of Rabindranath no longer remains hidden.

Rabindranath has always been ambidexterous; and his verse is as much indebted to his prose as his prose is to his verse. But elsewhere, as in *The Hungry Stones*,[28] his prose, in spite of borrowing most of the ingredients of poetry, cannot be called poetry, can at the most be called just poetic prose, whereas *Inscription*, though consciously aiming at simplicity, is endowed with the quality of poetry; and though I do not know how this impossible feat has been achieved, yet the mystery may be partly explained if we ponder on a well-known characteristic of *Inscription*. Everybody has noticed that Rabindranath's prose is as full of similes as his verse, but there is no likeness between his prose similes and verse similes. In prose he generally uses similes for the sake of meaning, to make his statements clearer through their help. On the other hand in his poetry similes spring from the need to correlate ideas or to create euphony. Similes of this sort do not help in the elucidation of meaning and at times may even obscure it. Nevertheless this does not harm poetry; for in the study of poetry reason may be unnecessary, faith alone being indispensable. The sole duty of the simile in poetry is to invoke the reader's faith; and faith does not come at the command of reason, but through direct sense-

[25] =*Lipika.*
[26] =*Paye Chalar Path.*
[27] =*Ratri O Prabhat.*
[28] =*Kshudhita Pashan.*

perception. Hence only Shankara commentaries are written on the attributeless Brahman, while living deities like Manasa, Shitala and Tarakeshwar get the homage of the people.

It is at the direction of this ancient truth that modern experts on advertisement are gradually reducing the space occupied by the advertised object in pictured advertisement. It has been observed that if the picture is sufficiently suggestive, it is quite unnecessary to sing the praises of the merchandise. For in that condition the viewer's mind is given no scope to argue and leans towards imagination; and he cannot easily forget the object whose name he then hears. A poet's use of similes is also like this; and the whirring of *The Cranes*, far from being brought home to us by the image of the sound of the celestial damsel's movement, disappears entirely. But the magic of those few words so overwhelms the reader's mind that he can no longer inquire about consistency and inconsistency. He then either accepts the entire poem without asking questions, or pulling himself out of the trance with vigorous effort, shakes his head and says: 'This is all delirium.' The similes of *Inscription* are of this sort, touched with dream; their significance is pictorial, not semantic; and as in ordinary poetry metre, by maintaining the regularity of sonic pattern, obfuscates the reader's common sense with a net of delusion, so in *Inscription* the similes anoint him with the enchanting Kohl of pictures and put his reasoning faculties to sleep. Poetry is therefore the true character of *Inscription* irrespective of its form.

In my judgment *Inscription* is a priceless book. This is not just because this book was for so long the only example of Bengali free verse, but also because the abundant powers and true beauty of ordinary Bengali first manifested themselves in this very book. Yet the weaknesses of *Inscription* are not altogether negligible; and the poet showed quite a bit of puritanism in selecting the themes of those poems. There is of course no such thing as dominion over subject-matter: at times you may tour the world and not meet it, while on other occasions its pranks may leave you with no time for baths and meals; and however conscious Rabindranath may be as a formal

artist, his poetry is mainly born of inspiration. Complaints about *Inscription* nevertheless remain. The question arises: is not the liberation of rhythm pointless when subject-matter itself has been unable to cross the boundaries of convention? And one has to admit that beside the thematic and stylistic broad-mindedness shown by metrical *The Fugitive*, *Inscription*, free of rhythm, appears somewhat narrow. One is therefore led to the inevitable conclusion that the poet himself had doubts in his mind about the success of this book; precisely because he did not know whether Bengali poetry would be able to endure rhythmic freedom to this degree, he printed the poems of *Inscription* as prose and chose for them themes that achieve artistic success by the sheer virtue of noble lineage.

The books that follow *Inscription* increase this doubt. In *Child Bholanath*,[29] *The Stream*,[30] *Purabi*[31] and *Mahua*[32] we see that while Rabindranath's genius is continually maturing in the handling of emotions, he no longer seems preoccupied with technique and experiment. This does not mean that these books are insignificant in poetic riches or shoddy in craftsmanship. This only means that their style is a refined and augmented version of an older style, not a new discovery. Needless to say, whichever path Rabindranath takes, his successful journey most often ends near the immortal regions; and there has been no exception to that rule in the above-mentioned books. However, all the people that one meets in this aristocratic paradise are born of Urvashi's[33] clan; there is certainly the immutable beauty of eternal youth in their faces, but there is no endless surprise of the unknown in their eyes. Hence an adventurer like Rabindranath, for ever journeying without any fixed destinations, could not bear for very long the dream-like, ethereal loveliness of this immovable pavilion; of his own will he once again bade farewell to paradise. But perhaps this time the eyes of heaven did not remain tearless; nor did the poet return alone;

[29] =*Shishu Bholanath*.
[30] =*Prabahini*.
[31] Named after a *ragini* of the same name.
[32] Named after a tree of the same name, the *Bassia Latifolia*.
[33] Name of a celestial nymph.

attracted by him, the Muse of poetry herself came down to this dusty earth. Of course the goddess has not the usual garland of coral-tree blossoms round her neck, while her earthy body casts shadows without embarrassment, not a celestial thing to do; but even people like us, blinded as we are with infatuation, realize as soon as we glance at her that though her attire lacks the traditional magnificence, yet she has within her the very soul of poetry.

I am not saying that *The End*[34] and *Yet Again*[35] are the peak of Rabindranath's poetry. I have heard that the poet does not quite like hilly regions and prefers the uniform fertility of plains. Even if this is not true about his tastes, the simile is yet very applicable to his works. The undulation visible there is the ruggedness of a plateau, with neither dizzy heights nor cavernous depths. Yet, in spite of admitting all this, one may justifiably believe that in linguistic, sonic and thematic contexts Rabindranath has in these two books arrived at a point beyond which advancement is impossible. All true poets have wanted to resolve the conflict between prose and verse, but none have been successful. Perhaps Rabindranath's perseverant efforts have at last ended that antagonism. Here perhaps is the triumph of that need for variety which had made the epic yield to the lyric. For this mode of expression is as mutable as life, as pervasive as air, as ravenous as the all-consuming fire. But for this very reason it is not safe to be in its company: dappled moths are burnt to death in its combustive ordeal, the only person to remain unblemished being Sita, the daughter of Earth; and the absence of government is ominous if the power to govern oneself is not deeply ingrained within one. I therefore fear that what is liberation for Rabindranath, who is inured to severe austerities, may well be for us the onset of disaster.

1933

[34] =*Parishesh.*
[35] =*Punashcha.*

The Bengali Novel

With special reference to Dhurjatiprasad Mukhopadhyaya's 'Antahshila'

I have heard it said that the major patrons of the Bengali novel are men under forty who come by the local trains to work in the city from the suburbs every day and urban women above forty. The things that people say may be true, but they are not surprising. For, sleeping at one's will too is dependent on organized and concentrated effort; and forty years are a mere wink for the practice that is needed to have a morning nap in the midst of the suffocating crowds of second class compartments: in fact learning to day-dream through the help of fairy tales is part of that training. But for women things are different. All householders are aware that spiritual catharsis is extremely difficult for women until they attain the status of mothers-in-law; and as trial by fire is the ancient mode of reformation, the Bengali housewife leaves to expert women the heavy responsibility of discussing other people through the medium of gossip and moves forward to the aforesaid culmination along the burning path of the culinary arts. However that may be, there is no doubt that the novel is our companion and entertainer in leisure and therefore its condition is even worse than that of Bengali poetry and nearly as perilous as that of Bengali essays. The economic laws of demand and supply are in truth valid in the world of art as well; and since God Himself either cannot, or does not, want to reveal Himself except to somebody towards whom He specially directs His manifestation, independent originality must certainly be rare in Bengali fiction.

Of course neither readers nor writers outwardly admit the existence of this rule; and the nature of the Bengali is so conventional that though he has curiosity, yet he is so poor in penetration that he excuses the lack of originality by pointing to the scanty social life of his people. But ordinary life is devoid

of variety in other countries too; thrill has always been rare in the world of everyday life; and inhuman and superhuman beings are products of the imagination. In addition, though the tempo of events is relatively faster in Europe in modern times, the mind of the eastern man is yet as complicated as that of the western. Though it does not seem possible that a Tolstoy could be born in this country, yet there is no bar to the emergence of a Dostoievsky. However, literature is not an object of earnest pursuit with us: the more serious-minded among us are devoted to religion and the others are busy in the quest of livelihood. Hence it is not desirable, in our opinion, to waste the intelligence in anything except the usual spiritual speculations or easy amusement. And that is why as the number of wise men is innumerable in Bengal, so the dearth of intellectual literature—especially intellectual fiction—is really great.

Fortunately the standards of fame and goodness are often separate; and the sort of book that fetches cheers from all kinds of readers does not generally satisfy the aspirations of a literary conscience. That is why most literary artists of the West regard with fear the wide dissemination of primary education in their countries; and they naturally wish that because they have given birth to works of art after tremendous labour, the proper enjoyment of them should also require equal effort. Hence they easily yearn for the eighteenth century, when most people did not care much about going to school, but when those who could read did not look upon study as the unerring weapon for the satisfaction of self-interest or the supreme drug to cure insomnia. Of course this age objects—or did object until a few days back—to the resuscitation of the aristocratic system of unequal rights and exploitation of the poor on which that intellectual excellence was based. Even then no modern writer wants to throw himself into a moving herd of sheep and it is their firm resolution that they would rather go into exile than leave scope for unauthorized entry into the assembly of the Muses.

As a result a large portion of present day literature is riddle, and the rest taunts and abuses, the purpose of which is to check

the bravado of fools. Looking for zoological parallels, one should easily remember the snail or the porcupine, or the pre-mythological chameleon, which, intoxicated with distinctive individuality, went against its own grain and finally accepted extinction. Luckily, things have not yet gone so far with Bengali intellectuals. Though born in this land of non-dualism, our wise authors have never forgotten that art is an activity of give-and-take; and though in the heaven of the fine arts the throne of the creator is in the highest place, yet the seat of the audience is not far below. But national tendencies are weaker than education received in childhood and our modern thinkers, being bred in the atmosphere of Western education, are all lovers of the above-mentioned quality of individuality. It is true that in the time of Michael Madhusudan too it was a Western ideal that inspired Bengali poets. But because in that age the common man had not had his leisure restricted to the very minimum through the grace of mechanical civilization, good literature had not yet got used to rejection: in the East as well as in the West it was acceptance that was the general rule in the kingdom of ideas.

Therefore Michael's language—Sanskrit minus nasals and aspirants—is intelligible to all and sundry with the help of any dictionary. Yet Mr Pramatha Chaudhuri's very current Bengali required polyglot readers; moreover, the deep significance of Birbali art eludes us if we are not well-versed in more than one subject. This does not mean that Mr Chaudhuri is against the Harijan movement,[1] it only means that he can put to use what he has learnt. His lifelong studies have not merely added a few meaningless letters to his name; his scholarship has enriched the wholeness of his active personality. Hence his writings require the appreciation of a co-religionist; and since few Bengalis are lucky enough to have his genius and opportunities, the appreciation that he has not obtained from his contemporaries will perhaps be given to him by posterity. But though he is deprived of the affection of the reader, perhaps almost every writer of these days is sympathetic towards him;

[1] Gandhi's movement for the uplift of the untouchables.

and people like Dhurjatiprasad whose literary lives have blossomed in contact with him seem at least to me to bear the obvious influence of Birbali individualism in their attitudes.

It is not my intention to substantiate what I have said above by bringing against Dhurjatiprasad the charge of plagiarism. Rather, it is his excessive self-dependence that surprises me and poses a difficulty for me; and it seems to me that his independent speculations do not care for universally accepted arguments and that he generally passes from one thought to another along the path of personal association. As a result, though I am often forced to agree with the conclusions of his essays, yet the ground on which his statements stand I frequently find slippery. I am, in other words, in favour of the impersonal mode in literature; my lack of faith in personalism is so deep-reaching that I feel no enthusiasm in the vain endeavour of expressing personal experiences; and as associations are the ruins of individual realizations, so contact with them only makes me dream-immersed, does not bring me face to face with indisputable truth. Hence in my judgment this behind-the-scene technique does not work in the essay; it is effective only in pleasurable compositions dealing with the emotions.

For emotion in art is a thing to be enjoyed: opinions of wise men may differ as to its true nature, yet it is hard for the compassionate connoisseur to remain calm when in contact with it; and as poetry and other forms of literature intend only to awaken the reader's consciousness, taking delight in oneself does not harm poetry so much as it harms the truth-seeking essay. Certainly truth also gives shelter to disputes and there is such a crowd of debaters round it that according to many salvation is not at all the goal of the human journey and the world of men is utilitarian. Even then I do not see the need for independence in the kingdom of truth. Perhaps, because my mental structure is prehistoric, I still have faith in logic; at least I do not doubt that falsehood may be recognized by means of its negative directions. Actually it is impossible for physical beings to accept self-contradictions; and as we are all physical entities this elementary rule of investigation is valid for all

of us. Hence, however men may argue about the real colour of the sky, men and women, young and old, all agree that it cannot be blue and non-blue at the same time.

But Dhurjatiprasad is a sociologist, which is why he is not moved by the negative statements of refutative logic. He seeks an absolute truth under the government of which peace and order will be restored to society which is now in a state of anarchy. Yet the epithet of practicability should go first of all to social truth; and as practice and attachment are essentially united, a difference of opinion ends easily in estrangedness. For in this case truth is no longer glorious by reason of its own quality; the super-imposition of the experienced is also its rival. Suppose I am a rustic and am not happy unless about a fortnight in advance of Holi I start getting intoxicated on bhang with twenty or twenty-five men from my village and creating an uproar with the accompaniment of drums and cymbals. But that is unkind to the ears of musical neighbours, who then come threatening us with sticks. Here both parties are of equal strength in their rights; for as I undoubtedly have a right to pursue my amusements, so too they have indisputable reasons to be annoyed, so that as soon as there is a clash the question of relativity comes up and the neighbours claim that as their intelligence is more weighty, so our intoxicated pleasure-seeking must obey their command, although we are more numerous.

In such quarrels Dhurjatiprasad joins the minority group and on the strength of his higher education and training he easily demonstrates, by the decipherment of obscure texts, that the majority of philosophers, scientists, artists and earnest worshippers have kept themselves at a distance from vulgar commoners like us and have sought the company of excellent and special people like himself. But let him call as many witnesses to his side as he may, as they are all full of praise for self-realization, their statements only confirm me in my self-confidence; and the more Dhurjatiprasad's humility diminishes, the more I understand that he would have never been so certain of the authenticity of his position if there had not been gaps in his arguments. That is why I did not accept even

the scientific opinions of his *Amra O Tahara*[2] and the well-considered statements of *Chintayasi*[3] antagonized me. Because I happen to know him personally I know that the author of these two books is not arrogant, but indeed a true humanitarian; and if, having spent all his life in seeking the welfare of others, today he claims to know what is good for me more than I do, I may not accept his claim, but it would be merely foolish to lose my patience on that account.

Although intelligent, Dhurjatiprasad is not really one for whom the intellect is all in all. He is genial and sensitive; and so in his recently published novel[4] the hero, Khagenbabu, does not ultimately remain content with profound scholarship, but puts an end to his self-knowledge in a fully conscious surrender. But though the end is emotional, there is no trace of sentimentalism in *Antahshila*. That knowledge is an artificial process, that the ultimate reality cannot be attained through its directions, and that it is the intellect which everywhere produces contradictions—these Bergsonian conclusions are reached by Dhurjatiprasad through the help of the intellect itself, not through emotional impulses. However, the privilege of the intellect is only a legend; at least not all intellectuals are destructive; and as there is a dualism of body and mind in man and as the mind can be split into thought and feeling, so the intellect too has a twofold activity, analytic and synthetic. The intellect of Dhurjatiprasad is of this last sort. But synthesis is a supra-logical activity. The wholeness that is not an aggregate of fractions is, like the full, indivisible Absolute, beyond our conceptions and words; the intellect is only its messenger, its friend being perfect enlightenment or mystical feeling. That is possibly the reason why in this intimate novel there is no external support for realism to lean on; the real-seeming world of direct perception floats like separated bubbles on the internally flowing stream of consciousness.

[2] ='We and They'

[3] ='You Think'

[4] *Antahshila*—Dhurjatiprasad Mukhopadhyaya. (Bak). Masculine *antahshil*, feminine *antahshila* mean one whose true nature, character or virtue is within, not overt or exposed; the suggestion is of strength in reserve, like a hidden current.

Moreover, as consciousness always issues from the individual and feeling is everywhere the great identifier between 'he' and 'I', in reality it is the author who is the mouthpiece of the book, though apparently it is Khagenbabu who is the hero of the story. However, Dhurjatiprasad's mind is so frank, his personality so broad, his curiosity so deep-reaching, that even this autobiography has become a symbol of the modern way of life. Khagenbabu and the characters round him are representatives of all of us: like them the man of today faces dualities like the general and the particular, the head and the heart, love and mastery; and though in the solution of these problems many of us move in a direction different from theirs, yet like them, we too desire the reconciliation of opposites. I therefore consider *Antahshila* to be a memorable book, in spite of its various faults and shortcomings as a novel. The excessive idiosyncrasy which causes Dhurjatiprasad to lose the support of his readers when he expresses his opinions through the medium of speculative essays becomes in this book the heightened mode which increases its value. For as the truth that is not universal is unacceptable, so each significant experience is necessarily authentic and complete in itself, against which the atheist's doubt is invalid and which it is the duty of the intelligent person to accept with humility.

A great deal of this lengthy talk is probably unnecessary. But I hope that at least it has been made clear that *Antahshila* is not quite a novel for juveniles. It is written for thoughtful people, and by a thoughtful person. In spite of this its narrative portions are marvellous; and where the ordinary storyteller ends, there Dhurjatiprasad begins. On the very first page the curtain falls on the highest tragedy of Khagenbabu's life; having cremated his wife Savitri who had committed suicide, he takes shelter in the house of the same Romola Devi whose evil advice had led Savitri to the path of suicide. From this springs a relationship, through the inner impetus of which Khagenbabu loses his proud ignorance and gradually realizes that although there was a ludicrous importunacy in Savitri's death, the accident was really the result of a terrible conflict

between his inhuman ideal and human nature. It was precisely because Savitri's subconscious mind had vaguely realized the fact that in her husband's evaluation it was Romola Devi who was pure gold and she herself tin foil, that their conjugal life became poisoned in its core. Jealousy concerning Khagenbabu's cousin is the explicit reason of the severe conflict, but the poor girl is in truth used as a mere pretext: she is very insignificant and innocent.

Khagenbabu therefore arranges to repent first by escaping from Romola Devi's company and lastly by accepting dangers and obstacles in body, mind and speech in the ancient saintly way. Consequently his unbalanced, intellectual, withered life suddenly grows mellow with spiritual riches; and the same thing also happens to Romola Devi and the devoted friend, the self-sacrificing Sujan. And the three of them realize once again, even in this machine-thundered twentieth century, that spiritual union is not merely the worthless dream of mystics, but that even the materialistic modern man is capable of it, though it seems to be impossible. The author does not give clear indication whether, after this non-dualistic realization, these characters would all shed their prejudices. But it seems to me that there is some hint at the end of the book that the cruel fetters of social restrictions would soon drop down from their limbs. However, in my summarizing the book looks like an allegory; and so I had better state at once that whatever may be the philosophical role of this novel, the story is absorbing and the characters vivid. But it is only people intimately acquainted with modern Western fiction who will derive maximum pleasure from the story.

For there is not much variety of incident in the story; with regard to place the imagination does not care to build up an unerring climax; it is simply not the author's intention to figure forth a full-fledged and well-thought-out plot: he wants to show the development and blossoming of two characters. In other words, Dhurjatiprasad agrees with André Maurois on the definition of the novel; both of them think that it is not the novelist's job to imitate life by depicting the puppet-show

of some moulded figurines on the model of traditional examples; it is his duty to delineate the development of men and women who are voluntarily unfolding themselves. In this effort Dhurjatiprasad has attained a special success. I have, of course, said before that whether there is or is not a similarity between the lives of the author and Khagenbabu, there is a great deal of similarity between them in character, which is probably why he should not be praised too much for this picture. But to endow with a soul a conventional image like Romola Devi is a truly surprising feat; and considered from this angle, the book seems completely free from superfluities: not a single line of the portrait is purposeless, all actions are significant, and the book ends precisely where the character reaches fullness.

Khagenbabu's portrait too is everywhere credible. Thanks to Dhurjatiprasad's extensive studies, he may be just a little too burdened at times; but even this, which is a fault in the other works of the author, has become a virtue here. For the hero's impassioned speeches on books and writers have nowhere produced any incongruities; even the quotations crammed with information have provided material for character-sketching. Dhurjatiprasad lets us know, *via* Khagenbabu, that he is well acquainted with Proust, Joyce, Virginia Woolf and other introspective novelists. Even if we had not been told of it, we would not have made any mistake about his ideal. And yet *Antahshila* is a Bengali novel; and perhaps Dhurjatiprasad alone among the Bengalis is capable of writing this kind of novel. Actually, though his acquired learning is foreign, his instinct, strictly inherited, is purely native; and though his respect for science and scientists is deep, yet there is heaps of evidence on every page of *Antahshila* to indicate that he is against the barren path of the analytic intelligence. Hence the present age will only sing the praise of his story-telling art and stop; it is neither possible nor desirable for us to escape dilemmas by sailing like him, with one foot in one boat and the other in another.

1935

W. B. Yeats
and Art for Art's Sake

Fact is stranger than fiction, says an English proverb. As proverbs are results of mere experience, their extensions are limited and exceptions to them are many. This drawback perhaps underlies the very nature of words; even in a detailed history the varied past does not reflect itself entirely faithfully: a chip of bone rouses the imagination of the inquirer as to the times in which the skeleton lived. The universality of matter and word is trifling, and so, living in this transcendental world, we deny the repetitiveness of history. Yet life cannot be lived without words. Leaving aside the immediate communication of the yogis,[1] words are not only the medium of exchange of knowledge, but a way of earning knowledge. From this point of view the oral tradition does not appear futile. It will be found that, surprisingly, fact is not only abreast of, but ahead of, fiction.

As an example, nineteenth-century Europe might be recalled. When, after floundering in the sentimentality of the French revolution, people of that part of the world touched firm ground in the middle of the century, they draped material things with the wonder of the unknown, and considered fairy tales highly disreputable. But what appeared so natural during the first phases of applied science proved, with the rapid spread of technology, to be bias. And equilibrium was so necessary for the preservation of society that experts on aesthetics immediately took up arms against physics. In this reaction William Butler Yeats was in the forefront. Though he did not, like his associates, look for opportunities to indulge in arbitrariness in the name of art or eulogize falsehood, still he was

[1] Yogis, among other powers, are said to be able to communicate immediately and intuitively, without having to employ the usual verbal processes.

more attracted by Celtic mythological scriptures[2] than by writings on mathematics; he accepted the proposition that fiction is more substantial and perennial than fact, however wonderful.

Unfortunately, the last-mentioned conclusion is also biassed. As adherence to material objects, which is in conformity with science, ends in the cruelty of imperialism, so the idea of art for art's sake culminates in the downfall of Wilde and such people. For elasticity is not only indispensable for society; excess ruins even individuals. But the time for this realization had not yet come. Despite the fact that the influence of the French symbolists never suited the temperament of English poetry, all writers, French or English, firmly believed that they were mouthpieces of a new mystical experience, the guard of the ancient palace of nectar,[3] the forerunners of prophets to come. Thus even self-conscious Yeats failed to realize the limitation of his ideals. Even individualists have to satisfy the claims of their times before they can behave as they want; so Yeats, as he lost one friend after another due to premature death, suicide, and alcohol, naturally thought that these tragedies were not so much the responsibility of the individuals as of the environment.

Probably this belief was not wholly exaggerated or totally unfounded. From Napoleon's day, England's presiding deity had been the goddess of commerce. Though the excellence of English poetry, all will admit, is a gift of the goddess of learning, the people, though blessed with this boon, show more excitement over questions of reduction of tariff than over the cause of individuality in art. They are not however to be blamed for this. Better than bare subsistence conditions have long assured their motherland a place in the forefront of progress. Many Englishmen have exiled themselves from England because the climate was not congenial to the worship of the goddess of the arts; yet England still is the last refuge for liberal ideas oppressed elsewhere. It is possible that English forbearance has

[2] The term used in Bengali is *purāṇa;* a *purāṇa* in the Indian textual tradition is a sacred writing, which is why we have used the translation 'scripture', usually a compendium of legend and myth clustered around a particular deity or deities.

[3] The Bengali phrase is *puratan amṛtaniketan*, 'ancient abode of nectar'. *amṛta*, nectar, is that which is immortal or which bestows immortality.

nothing to do with adherence to righteousness; it might well have its origin in the sluggish temperament of the English people. And so, though English society has, from time immemorial, indulged personal whims, it has never received kindly any eccentric personality—not even for the sake of his talent.

From this point of view a similarity with the Hindus is evident. As we outwardly conform with ritual, allowing ourselves meanwhile a private atheism, so the English preserve convention in public while unhesitatingly making their homes citadels of autocracy. Needless to say, the amount of conceit involved in this attitude is great; nevertheless through its blessings the English have saved themselves from many disasters. The proper use of power and competence, like that of the wealth of a moneylender, provides not decrease but increase in dispensations; it is no wonder, then, that with the expansion and development of the middle class in the nineteenth century, public opinion had the power to do the undoable.

But it is hard to imagine an action without a reaction: disobedience is the answer for command; and as the two parties in the struggle between man and nature are equally strong, the world is therefore, on the whole, stable. And so accumulated dissatisfaction with all-powerful convention broke the barriers erected by ages in the last decade of the nineteenth century. To be precise, this protest did not begin at the time of Pater; his kinsman, Matthew Arnold, was its instigator. And although too much attraction for defeat ruined Dowson and others, Browning's service to the cause of progress, so admired by many, was also founded on the bookish idea of the luxury of sin. Possibly this was why Wilde failed to receive the favour of indifference from the English: the general populace saw him as a symbol of an asocial movement, and therefore he had to bear alone the burden of an offence which is after all not so uncommon among the English.

By nature Yeats never was one of the panegyrists of Wilde, whose artificial splendour and ceaseless self-advertisement he always disliked. While he was not happy to see his own disrespect for Wilde reflected in the universal hatred of him, still

he realized that it was the common man's jealousy of the extraordinary man that was at work behind the oppression of Wilde—that it was a case similar to that of Parnell, that superman whom England ground under with the burden of abuse when she could no longer tolerate his greatness. Still, to Yeats the atmosphere of London suddenly became poisonous; he remembered that the honest Morris was no longer in this world, that his intimates, expert craftsmen, were one by one proceeding to their fates, and that, evicting Henley, Rudyard Kipling was occupying the hearts of the people. Yeats therefore decided to return home.

He was already attracted by the rediscovered Celtic tradition; and at this time, having formed a bond of friendship with Lady Gregory, he had the idea that the modern world was infested by urban civilization. Man still heard the responses of the supernatural only where the germs of that plague had not yet spread—such as the primarily agricultural country of the Irish. Whether or not villagers, living close to nature as they do, are constantly meeting celestial beings, at least they believe in the sanctity of places; as their self-imparted knowledge is not impaired by poor education, they know that mountains and seas are symbols of the infinite, that the everyday meadow, wharf, road are, by imperishable association with great men of the past, also resorts of the supernatural. The chances of men being reduced to bestiality are less where they are not, for want of space, forced to live like a flock of sheep all crowded together; in such places they are independent and thus careful about protecting the dignity of others. Where there is want of these distinct rights not only art and literature, but also society and politics, are gloomy; it would be easy to revive them in Ireland.

For the Irish people have always believed in self-rule. The inherent individualism that made Gaelic poetry the receptacle of *vira-rasa*[4] during the days of Irish independence was

[4] The term *rasa*, in Sanskrit æsthetic theory, signifies the true appreciation, the pure impersonal æsthetic joy which a piece of art gives. This appreciation is in terms of the prevailing mood or spirit of the work, e.g. love, laughter, and in this case heroism—*vīra*.

now reduced to trying to forget the humiliation of dependence by muttering the names of great men. So Berkeley, though born in the eighteenth century, could not do away with his racial pride; commenting on Locke's commonly accepted dualism, he remarked that he, like all Irishmen, was a devotee of monism. Swift and Burke had very close connections with English political life, yet they hesitated to bring forth timely praise of democracy. It was not easy to find the prudence and moderation of the eighteenth century in the Ireland of the twentieth. The vigour and confidence of older times had degenerated into jealousy, dispute, and verbosity. Still, Yeats was not intimidated. He thought that it would be easy to bring about reform in a country which did not consider ability, diligence, or adroitness in choosing a leader, but which judged personality by the degree of its magnanimity and self-sacrifice. He thought that the lost glory of Erin would be restored by internal reform, without involvement in the external political oppression.

He also considered that the time was ripe. With the dislodging of Parnell, the constitutional government of the Irish nation came to an end. Though a secret attempt to organize an armed revolt was going on throughout the country, the national fervour was rootless and could forge ahead to conquer the horizon of ideas. Moreover, the patent slogan of international unity had not yet become the *bija-mantra*[5] of extremism. To Yeats, therefore, the cultivation of the tradition of his land appeared to be a respectable pursuit. He regarded self-sufficiency as desirable both for the individual and for the nation. And since the external world was also made up of the objects of one's senses, knowledge of self would lead naturally to knowledge of the universe. Further, perception of the universe through self-realization had nothing to do with egotism; strict

[5] *Bīja-mantra* is literally a 'seed-formula'. A *mantra* is a ritual formula which contains in it power; *mantras* are most often drawn from sacred texts such as the Rig-Veda, and repetition of them and meditation upon them empower and validate the activities which follow. *bīja* means 'seed'; a *bīja-mantra* is often a single word or syllable of the full mantra, which however contains the power of the full *mantra* in it, as the seed contains the tree.

impartiality has long been recognized as a feature of knowledge, whether that knowledge comes through the heart or the brain.

Psychology has, of course, an aversion to self-negation. Utilitarians like Bentham have heard the echo of self-interest even on the plane of ultimate truth. Whether psychologists, other than Freud, approve or not, any man of experience knows that the excessively attached is as sincere as the indifferent: he never attempts to hide the faults of his beloved; rather, the very innumerability of his beloved's faults makes his love endless. This paradox does not apply in fact to love alone; all intense attachments are paradoxical. Inquiring into the contribution of Seneca to Elizabethan drama, Eliot showed that the tragic heroes and heroines of the time found self-love only in self-reproach. Richards has also supported the same conclusion; and his disciple, Empson, has opined that man's worthlessness is the main subsistence of his nature, for there is no self-admiration apart from self-accusation.

All admirers of ancient philosophy will recognize that in this remark there is nothing of the modern love for the ambiguous. Negativism is a very old system and pre-Hegelian theoreticians had posited the simultaneous presence of existence and negation. Possibly Socrates was the discoverer of this ancient truth. At least its diffusion, in the originality of Aristotle which overthrew his preceptor, is undisputed. And although realizing his mistakes in all other matters Plotinus went back to Plato; he never hesitated to admit the generic character of particulars or peculiarities of genus. Perhaps due to his early acquaintance with Hindu philosophy, Yeats always remained a follower of Plotinus; he never therefore differentiated between self-realization and knowledge of the universe. Following the lead of communities of mystics everywhere, he thought that man, finding the present imperfect relative to its possibilities, was moving day after day, age after age, generation after generation, towards the unholy. For the only way to attain the supernatural is the union of ephemeral and eternal, present and future, soul and soullessness. That the bridge between

existence and negation is not merely a repetition of the mystic riddle but the unfolding of scientific truth has been proven by modern geometry, where parallels meet outside the finite. It is also borne out by the fact that busy people avoid straight lines, to gain time.

Anyway, today, Yeats is sure of the fact that the 'unholy' referred to above is not *bhuma* or God. Even in his days of youthful dedication to spiritualism he had great doubts about it. For his cult of personality is stronger than that of Leibnitz —so strong that he is unwilling to accept even the universal validity of reason, let alone the notion of preconceived equality. In his opinion, investigation is an instrument for producing truthfulness, not a means of discovering truth: there is at the back of it a businesslike ingenuity and the careless audacity of a wilful sinner, not the humility of endeavour or the anxiety of transcendent doubt. For this reason defeat in debate is unbearable, while victory is insignificant; failure is the result of remediable carelessness and success the boon of powerful memory, where it is a matter of conventional method and meaningful practice. And none of these vices and virtues is natural—they are accidental. But emotion is a different thing; even psychologists have to admit its tortoiselike character, and its fidelity to its own necessities. It does not care for time or space, it keeps its own pace, stops when it needs to, and originates in another birth—at least the seed is planted in another generation.

It has therefore no conflict with individual nature. And even though heroism is often ruined by the blows of emotion, by them hindrances to self-realization are destroyed. It may sound strange, but it is nevertheless true that there is a gulf of difference between individualism and individual nature. While individualism views the present as disconnected, individual nature views it as a Bergsonian diffusion of past and future. It is of course impossible to reckon this kind of time with an almanac; it can hardly be called universal; the cause-and-effect relationship does not apply; it can best be compared

with the doctrine of *karma*.[6] On the other hand, Nietzsche's entry into this dominion is prohibited; it is inconceivable that any individual could flee from its borders; apart from any extraordinary influence of vice or virtue, there is in it no hope of avoiding responsibility. For this reason, self-sufficient individual nature is equivalent to transcendental *nirvana*.[7] In both cases, self-aggrandizement is an obstacle to the desired end. Among all the faculties for consciousness emotion is the sole dispassionate and impersonal one; therefore, said the Buddhists, it should be shunned. Yeats on the other hand considered that surrender to emotion is the only means to eternal emancipation.

Certainly no rationalist would agree with this advice of Yeats. The perception of incongruity which supplies the basis of his esoteric knowledge is not so much illogical as abstract. As a matter of fact, this unnamed contradiction is a technical term; though Yeats found it in his search for poetic ideals rather than in seeking theories, the pure essence of emotion, like intellectualism, is the result of ceaseless pruning; and generalization born of mind is as devoid of truth as the intense passion of the heart is meaningless. Opposed though he was to intellectualism, Yeats is no fool; he did not take much time to realize this. Early in his life he realized that tragedy is the height of poetry; and the study, from his boyhood on, of that not so new branch of literature convinced him that in order to effect Aristotelian purgation of emotion through plays, undiluted emotion was far more necessary than the sculptural smoothness of the characters.

This is the difference between art and life. Although passion incites flesh and blood to action, yet in daily life it is impure and weak, wavering as it does between expectations and

[6] By the doctrine of *karma*, fruits naturally follow all acts; one's current condition has been determined by acts perhaps in a previous life. From this point of view, time has a kind of unity, by which the deed and its results are inextricably bound together.

[7] *Nirvāṇa* literally means 'a blowing out, an extinction'; it is a term most often used by Buddhists to describe the ultimate state, in which the bonds of material nature have been cut and that which remains is neither existence nor non-existence.

apprehensions of gain and loss. In the history of the ordinary man there is sorrow, not tragedy; there is misery, not total cataclysm. He may excite laughter by his folly; but he cannot, by his errors, circulate the message of empirical truth. The ordinary man is therefore the hero of a comedy which aims at entertaining people. Reflection on the characteristics of this is good enough for a poet who is the companion of our leisure; but one who is eager to instruct—and the main aim of tragedy is the improvement of ourselves—is bound to look for universals. He cannot be content with reflections, he must have symbols. Since the symbol is contrived for the welfare of the ordinary man, there is in its construction no place for the kinds of difficulties which beset the Mallarmé school; and though in his autobiography, *The Trembling of the Veil*, Yeats' echo of that poet is intentional, the French symbolists differ from Yeats.

Mallarmé at least made it quite clear that dream is the only truth; the daily world which is seen and touched appeared to him so unrealistic that, realizing the hopelessness of even trying to express one's extra-sensual self in human language, he used to say often that the highest expression of poetic talent was in the spotless silence of a blank sheet of paper. Yeats does not subscribe to this view. Perhaps he was overcome with the fascination of self-castigation in his adolescence; he realized by the grace of his early initiation that in the creation of literature complexity is easily attained, while lucidity is the result of the utmost exertion. Perhaps he could not avoid the influence, which he inherited, of the art of painting; devoting his early life to this art, which was cultivated by his father, he observed that a good painting, though it might be beyond verbalizable meaning or reluctant to follow nature faithfully, becomes significant only when by its construction it brings into view the infinite, the abstract, the visionary.

So, enrolling himself in the Rhymers' Club in his early youth, he learned from a tender age to think like a learned man; but very soon, coming into contact with J. M. Synge and Lady Gregory, he selected the kind of language, imagery, and props, which had not the slightest hint of Ibsenian highbrowism or

Wismanian fastidiousness. He was satisfied, like the Greek dramatists, with portraying the spirit of universal man on the canvas of a simple, easy, mythological or mythlike story. Thus trust and reverence for the incorporeal would not be found in his poetry; his patronage would not help develop the conceit of one conscious of his own learning; his unauthorized interference would not make the philosopher worry; his poetry would look expectantly towards an audience that loved music, a spectator who loved appropriateness.

This means that Yeats does not deny the existence of matter. But it does appear transitory to him. At the same time, he realized that there was no valid reason to treat dreams as more imperishable. So he tried to prove by application that material and non-material things are equally real: if it is possible for man to live on the earth, one cannot discard the possibility of ghosts, dead souls, celestial nymphs, heavenly musicians, and the like. We tend to deny the existence of these only because we have an incomplete knowledge of the universe. Unless someone knows archaeology well, he will tend to treat ancient weapons like lumps of earth and throw them away; similarly, due to our ignorance, we fail to perceive the incorporeal even if it appears to us. And ignorance not only makes us blind to things which are without form, it also plays a role in the case of things which are directly perceivable; there too, not looking for that which is beyond form among the forms perceived by our senses, we delight in playing with the material idol called experience.

Therefore it will no longer do to cling to our pride in science. While opening the doors of the mind by the knocking of experience, we will have to say that the invasion by that country of which the stranger is an emissary is inevitable, but that her intentions are inscrutable, impenetrable, and troublesome. After this, unique experience is worthless; the most ordinary is the more preferable. About the latter we may know nothing more, but at least we know that the lord of human destiny is showing special favour by sending it again and again to this earth. But probably Yeats has an objection to the use of the

word 'lord', for in his concept of destiny he does not take refuge in any God. In his opinion, a self-contradictory, rootless consciousness, like the Brahman of the Vedanta, because of its own nature sometimes takes the shape of man; and therefore he tolerates the mistakes, the falls, the faults of human beings. And this is why even in his plays Yeats is indifferent to characterization, while the emotions, obsessions, and intuitions inherent in his characters dominate his works.

On the other hand, Yeats is known as a Romantic; and to that whimsical group sudden impulses are more valuable than lifelong habits. Their active inclination is less favourable towards the systematic search than dependent upon inspiration; and they are all dexterous in suppressing knowledge of the self while enlarging the ego. Of course, the exception to this rule led romantic literature to its zenith; and Wordsworth is a great poet because he did not want to be exiled forever in the loneliness of the wilderness. But in taking stock of any movement it is wise to leave out its principals; and in the opinion of modern science a universal rule is a poetic fancy; what is real are tendencies, uncertain movements by undefined groups of things. Even though the conclusion strikes one as unjust, it is true that the later poets of the nineteenth century did not write their poetry with the aid of the tranquil recollections so praised by Wordsworth; undisciplined expressions of sudden excitement was the main formula of their literary endeavour. His own people therefore first looked at Yeats with mistrust; and the dream that had brought him back to his native land—that of changing the self-adoration of the Irish to self-knowledge—remained an illusion for a long time.

Neither side can be solely blamed for this misunderstanding; though it was because of it that Yeats moved away from national life, he cannot but admit today that it was by its grace that his present self-composure is greater than that of any other poet. As a matter of fact, using excitement as the measuring-rod, Yeats' anger at the moment was perhaps more unreasonable than was the intolerance of the Irish people of the time; for if, due to his unquestionable talent, Yeats established himself in

the circle of great Englishmen, and if he continued to be so candid about unpleasant truth, the Irish naturally thought that Erin would thereby lose the rest of its few foreign friends. Moreover, despite the harvest of Freudian research in the dawn of the twentieth century, psycho-analysis was not yet included among the daily luxuries; and even people of those times who tended necessarily towards non-theism knew that the faith of the orthodox was as straightforward and spontaneously manifested as the opinion of the heretic.

As a result, Yeats' first play, *The Countess Cathleen,* failed to satisfy any group. The Catholics, blind with anger, felt that if that compassionate woman could sell her soul to the devil and still find a place in heaven, the blessings of the outrage- and oppression-enduring Church were totally unnecessary; and the dissatisfied irreligious rightly spread the word that if salvation were not a prize for a pious act but a witness to good will, if there really were a God, good fortune would be equally distributed among all people; and since this does not happen, there is no God and man is only a temporary plaything of blind fate. Yeats' next play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan,* further developed the controversy. In it there was certainly no leaning towards things religious, but there was doubt about the love of country of the common people; the suggestion being true, everyone found it unbearable.

Realizing the strength of his argument—that the average man loves money more than freedom and the average woman forsakes love of ideals to cleave to a happy domestic life—everybody became furious; and Synge's subsequent staging of naturalistic plays at the Yeats-founded Irish Literary Theatre, far from adding fuel to the fire of Irish self-satisfaction, was the immediate cause of country-wide riots. For a long time Yeats had no dearth of friends; but now even his intimates moved away and joined the chorus of abuse. The intelligentsia of the country heaved a sigh of relief when Synge died prematurely of poverty, despair, and incurable disease; and having gradually lost the two or three hundred spectators upon whom he depended in his dream-wanderings with the Irish

National Theatre, Yeats finally began to write such plays as could be performed in his own drawing room solely before his own people.

Over and over again it has been seen that slighted, proud people soothe the fire of an indifferent environment by entering the shell of pure art; and for that reason, though we might not have much faith in the standards of judgment of Marxian critics, we must at times accept their terrible comments about certain artists. But real purity is only difficult, not impossible, to attain; and where it is met its glorification does not depend upon any kind of personality; and one day or another, spontaneously overcoming temporary antagonism, endless time and vast earth bow their heads at its feet. This is true in Yeats' case; his artistic conscience, far from being poisoned by the bitter criticisms of his accusers, was nourished by it, and his loneliness further developed his feelings and sharpness of mind, and the conscious fastidiousness of plays like *At the Hawk's Well* cannot prevent the approbation of people today—everybody knows that his unbiographical, unspectacular, insubstantial, essentially intense style of play-writing is the contribution of Ireland to world literature.

I certainly do not see any unexpected revelation of Yeats' talents in *Hawk's Well*; I feel that most of what the moderns say about his sudden transformation is unfounded. For from one point of view perhaps there has been no maturer writer in English before him; *Crossways*, one of his early writings, still surprises us with its rush of flawless beauty; and it is doubtful that his *The Tower* or *The Winding Stairs* would be understood by those who had not read the essays which he wrote in the last century. Although, being modest and generous, he thought so, it is not true that Yeats is in Ezra Pound's debt for such recent qualities as metrical freedom. In fact, in standards of excellence he has for a long time stood alone; no one ever taught him anything about the art of poetry—just the opposite: many have drawn, without acknowledgment, the capital for their own businesses from his charity.

Yet, readers' improved taste is not the only cause of Yeats'

present reputation. His own evolution is noteworthy. That evolution is so proper and fitting that it might be called supplementation; as a result of it the ties of his individual nature were not broken, but through it the complete ordering of his perception of the universe came about. On the other hand, when it takes two to make a quarrel, the reader cannot be held wholly responsible if he and the poet pull in two directions. And although the complaint is just that it was the dark ignorance of pre-war readers that clouded the fame of Yeats for a long time, it is equally true that the unnecessary impudence and sense of apartness of Yeats and associates like George Moore caused many sympathetic readers to retreat. But history is not controlled by anyone—even Yeats the microcosm is deprived of that; and as the World War of 1914, the Easter Rebellion of 1916, and the internal strike of 1919 deflected the outlook of the nationalists from difference in literary opinions to disagreement on political affairs, Yeats understood that all those who bathed or drowned themselves in the river of blood —whether formerly his antagonists or not—were great men, generous and honourable. They might not have the right to enter the self-possessed world of art, but their entrance into the deathless world beyond art is unrestricted.

He did not discard for a moment his lifelong devotion or belief. But it seemed that beauty's attraction for him somehow diminished thereafter; at least he had to admit that beauty is not found only by avoiding the ugly, that the immediate defeat of the ugly at the hands of the artist is inevitable. It is true that long before, Yeats had assumed this as a theory, and the main thesis of his philosophical argument is that self-sufficiency is reached only by the establishment of equilibrium between the self and what is not the self. But these conclusions had rested in his intellect and could not come down to the level of his existence, to the core of his feelings. One day in 1916 the obstacle suddenly disappeared; a most ordinary man, by giving his life for an abortive revolt, gave birth to an awesome beauty. Balancing the narrowness of the patriots by his magnanimity and singing of their praises, Yeats now started writing

poetry in momory of their and his own lamented past; in gracefulness these might be inferior to his earlier poems, but they are far higher in honour.

I indicated before that in my opinion Yeats never underwent any unexpected change; even those who have read his works without much attention will possibly have noticed that the themes of his recent poems were treated in his early essays. But in my opinion subject matter is external to poetry, while form is its essential element: and form again is not based on any artificial device, but is rooted in the autonomy of the artist. Certainly in outstanding prose literature, the writer's arbitrariness does not go; but there subject gives birth to the treater of the subject. The nature of poetry is quite different, for here the genre is the instigation for the user of the genre. Thus, just because one hears the echo of his earlier essays in his later poetry, it is unjust to consider him immutable; in this case, rather, the right conclusion would be that he has bridged the gulf that so long existed between his heart and his intellect; and since these days he can feel through his intellect and judge through his heart, he does not have to sweat for selection: everything, even his grave and serious prose, is automatically pure poetry.

Until now his verse has carried outbursts of passion; all else he considered unbeautiful, and loaded it on the shoulders of prose. Therefore, before the Easter Rebellion there was no truce between his prose and his poetry; though the opposition of the two brought about a kind of equilibrium, in no way did it bring together the divided personal nature of the author. Now his fear of ugliness was suddenly dissolved; he had such control of himself that he had no objection even to the return of bestiality. He realized that the reconciliation of opposites was not only the duty of an individual, but the vow of civilization. So if the predictions of the Christian scriptures are fulfilled, the coming of a man-God will never again occur and our self-circumambulation will cease at the reawakening of pre-Scriptural man-Man.

I am aware that criticism of poetry is no place for a discussion

of philosophy. It is particularly unpardonable to make a complex mish-mash of facts and theories and history and philosophical doctrine out of a discussion of such a good poet as Yeats. Still, in a brief introduction to a soft-spoken poet like him, some incomprehensibility is inevitable; literary symbols, like the technical terminology of philosophy, rumble much, but yield no rain. As an example, it will not be out of place to mention that absolute art called 'Pure Poetry': and even reading casually one finds that inhuman quality in many of his poems. And although Yeats has very few rivals—at least in English—as a writer of unbiassed and self-sufficient poetry, there is in his writing none of the delightful verbosity of Swinburne. Like Shakespearean plays, his works mutually support each other. From the point of view of absolute excellence, many of the works of both are insufficient, and yet leaving out any of the works of either makes impossible the evaluation and proper enjoyment of the rest. I believe that this continuity, this consecutive quality in their works is a general mark of great poets; and a great poet who, like Li-Po, is born with this supreme greatness, can reflect the endless universe even in the conventional quadruplets of Chinese poetry.

Yeats is no exception to this rule; and since his intensity is a result of the union of internal and external, it is absolutely necessary to remember the history of his place and time, his faculties and intellect, his intentions and accomplishments, in order to understand the significance of any of his works. In this respect his writings are complex; but from another point of view, his language is so lucid that its chains never hamper the freedom of his ideas. He is so immensely confident in the natural creative power of the *Shabdabrahma* that he never tries to describe, but busies himself trying to suggest; and that is why, however mysterious the subject matter of his poetry seems to be, its appeal is universal. For, when one understands the literature of a people to whose culture one does not belong, then literature is another name for utility. And although many times this kind of literature only supplies a dose of luxury, as because of a dearth of natural beauty the cultural wealth of

former generations is the receptacle of the contempt of later generations, so Yeats' poetry commands general sympathy only because of its self-generated form.

Still, the nature of form and that of device are different; and though service to art to the detriment of the latter is distressing, yet fine art is not craftsmanship only because of the blessings of form. Craftsmanship ends with the proper use of materials, and is not moved by any apprehension of a possible emotional relationship between producer and consumer; it brings refractory materials under its control, and busies itself with allotting to form the task of removing deficiencies from things produced by mechanical devices by imprinting on their structure the originality of the author. Training in the elevated practice of art and excellent examples are sufficient for that; but the development of form depends upon life as a whole. It seems to me that the difference between form and device is that between characteristic and personality as Herbert Read sees it.

As a matter of fact, craftsmanship and form are respectively expressions of characteristic and personality; and once the mastery of characteristic comes, it is difficult to lose. Craftsmanship at this point supplies unity and tranquillity to a work of art, and form gives it life. But characteristics are the result of imitation. Man develops character through the interaction of the advice of friends and relatives, by control of his environment, and by his many associations. But personality is the result of the effort of self-examination. Personality therefore is intimately associated with experience, and experience is the companion of self-examination—one doubts nothing unless personal experience clashes with convention. Still, personality is not a mere reflection of experience; it is rather the touchstone of experiences. Personality is also a symbol; its aim is to make the individual surpass his background and reach a continuous universal philosophy.

Consequently, the title of 'miser' or 'insular' does not suit a hero. Even though its welfare is accidentally threatened, still it is not at risk of life, so there is no temptation to transform

a wayside inn into a fortress: it finds its joy in the journey; it seeks to expand its perspective by moving from one place to another. Yeats also knows this; he is more interested in fulfilment than in the search—he is not satisfied merely with unique devices; he always searches for maturity of form. But form and life go hand in hand. Yeats' literary endeavours are therefore not confined to libraries: time and again he surpasses the limits of his individuality by unhesitatingly dispensing his talent and wisdom to propaganda and organization, to politics and philanthropy, to the world and to society; and the modern mind and contemporary age blossom forth along ancient lines in the nectar-world of his most minimal poetry.

In the opinion of Croce and Gentile, history and fairy-tale are two sides of the same coin; and only individualists are aware that matter is the ascetic self-forgetfulness of materialists. The brief description above is perhaps one-sided; my own personal likes and dislikes, apprehensions and perceptions, doubts and dissensions have surely distorted Yeats' own problems; and the matters above will probably appear quite different to those who are younger or older than I, to those born outside Bengal or beyond India, and to those whose personal loss or gain have never been involved with the flow or ebb of nationalistic movements. For the kinship of fact and theory is not only verbal or audible, but meaningful; and an analysis of the denotation of these two words will show that the inferences of authorities who are by nature miserly are evident through the senses of the liberal common man.

Needless to say, the same kind of authoritativeness does not suit my writing; it incessantly fascinates me that precisely at a time when most people are familiar with Yeats, it is totally unnecessary for a vigorous and powerful lover of poetry to discuss the occurrences of his life; and if one is able to immerse himself straightaway in the sea of the beauty of his poetry without paying any attention to a dry discussion of his ideas, he will be far better off. But I do not have that much independence; and since I have recognized him as a great poet, it appears ridiculous to me to sing irrelevant praises of the

unimpeachable quality of his art. I seek in his work an example of carrying out a life that will restore our squandered heritage, the strength and vigour of our lost inheritance, our lost peace and tolerance. But this search is also biassed and its utility subject to argument; and even in a less short essay, an attempt to draw an outline of the always propitious universal perspective which Yeats created by combining Plato, Plotinus, Shankaracharya, Vico and Sorel with Marx, Blake, Shelley and Celtic literature, would be as audacious as it would be dangerous.

1936

A Poet of Bengal—
Bishnu Dey

Mr Bishnu Dey is my friend and I admire him. Though not a blind admirer, I am certainly favourably disposed towards him. This essay is therefore fondly biassed, and since it would be fair to accuse it of partiality, the very significance of such one-sided judgment might be disputed. But there is a world of difference too between detraction and inquiry into the nature of poetry; and not only is sympathy the greatest sustenance of friendship, but as the good critic is by nature sympathetic, affection for a friend is no bar to scholarship and the unseemly hyperboles of admiration are of help to the connoisseur. Moreover, Bishnu Dey's poetic genius is something novel and extraordinary; and though he has been creating very mature poetry from youthful years, his techniques are so unprecedented, at least against the background of Bengali literature, that it is impossible to make a just evaluation of his poems without a spirit of respect and geniality. However, just as the aspirant hankers after kindliness, so the lack of sympathy may do much harm even to a person whose fame is already established; and all poets are clamorous in chanting the praises of never-ending Time and the wide world in the hope that kindred spirits will turn up, if not today, then certainly in the not too distant future. For, according to Rabindranath, *sahitya*[1] is the modern name for words charged with *rasa*,[2] precisely because they are born of the union of more than one; and however absurd this

[1] =Literature. As the word is derived from *sahita*, meaning *with* or *together*, it may be explained as *togetherness*, *companionship*, *union*. Literature *unites* the writer and the reader, *brings them together*.

[2] A keyword in Indian literary criticism. When the various human emotions derived from sensuous experience become stabilized and powerful enough to melt the heart, they are called *rasas*. Nine generic *rasas* are usually enumerated: passion and sexual love, heroic excitement and enthusiasm, sorrow, wonder, the sense of the ludicrous, fear, disgust, anger and tranquillity. Some add a tenth: parental affection.

derivation may seem to the etymologist, yet Socrates held that even a search for Truth, not to speak of a search for Beauty, was vain labour if there was no heartfelt cooperation between the speaker and the listener. That is possibly why Coleridge did not acknowledge the existence of obscurity; on the contrary he firmly believed that the overwhelming impact of true poetry reaches the innermost soul of the reader long before the meaning unfolds itself.

If, from what I have said above, one comes to suspect that Bishnu Dey's unprecedented poetry is inconceivably bristling with difficulties, that like some other contemporaries he too makes no distinction between originality and pretension and feels pleased with himself if he can fuddle the devoted reader of poetry, one may perhaps be forgiven. But indeed from this point of view Bishnu Dey is extremely innocent; and since his intellect is the aggregate of genius and erudition, the dreary repetition of conundrums does not seem novel to him: from a study of his predecessors he realizes that variety can be found in the individual manifestations of a continuous tradition. This tradition, of course, is not just Bengali, but that of universal man; and consequently Bishnu Dey's lucidity will probably escape us if we judge him only in terms of that nineteenth-century British ideal which is an introduction to Rabindranath as well as modern Bengali poetry. But those who have overcome innate prejudices about the nature of literary compositions and have made the effort, even once, to reach their own independent conclusions, will have no doubt at all that this poet has a really intimate knowledge of the uncorrupted character of the Muse of Poetry. Hence a writer as inornate as Bishnu Dey is rare in this country, and not only are the uses of metre and rime, similes and other figures of speech in his poetry very well-measured, he has nowhere wanted to hide the scarcity of ideas under the sanctity of subject-matter or the ponderousness of meaning. He has made common images throb with life by his steadfast acceptance of universal feeling.

In other words Bishnu Dey understands that it is the principal characteristic of the poet's mind to maintain an impartial atti-

tude when selecting themes, and that if the loftiness of subject-matter could ensure the immortality of poetry, the number of people reading Nabin Sen would not have dropped to zero, nor would Herrick's contemporary Henry Moore have lived only in the memory of antiquarians. Perhaps an elevated theme is really a hindrance to the creation of pleasurable literature; and personally I do not know any poets except Lucretius and Dante who have been able to effect a complete union of philosophy and poetry. That is possibly why Mallarmé, in spite of being well-versed in philosophy, told Degas, who was seeking poetic fame, that poetry is made of words, not ideas; and though the autonomy of the literary language was indeed a discovery of Richards, yet his predecessors too acknowledged that the meaning of poetry was not determined by dictionaries but was synonymous with fulfilment. Of course there is a touch of exaggeration in this opinion, for whether or not sound played an important role in the origin of language, it is almost universally held that all words are necessarily symbolic. Hence even the leaders of art-for-art's-sakists cannot altogether avoid the infection of subject-matter: at best they forgo the use of similes and frequently take refuge in metaphors. Even then a complete equation of literal meaning and exactitude is impossible to achieve; and not only do etymological meanings decay in time, one has also to conclude that although one may subscribe, for the sake of argument, to the idea of the indestructibility of radical suggestion, yet primary words and their derivatives and compounds often have very different fields of reference, so different that in many cases one justly wonders how such words could have coexisted at the same time.

As an example one might mention the sky-flower;[3] and the blue sky is even more unreal in physics than its flower is non-existent in metaphysics. Hence an excessive attachment to things is rare among pure poets; and though their daily hunger and thirst are never assuaged by the insubstantial provision of supra-mundane imagination, yet from their observation of the

[3] 'Plucking sky-flowers', i.e., 'plucking flowers from the sky' is the Bengali equivalent of 'building castles in the air'.

constant futility of mystical literature they naturally conclude that the poet's task is not the vain imitation of scientific objectivity but that his primary duty consists in the reconciliation of words which have deviated from their respective functions. Language, in other words, is torn between plain meaning and indirect intention; and as the first reaches its peak in mathematics, the second finds its ultimate fulfilment in poetry. Poetry, therefore, has no dealings with truth or untruth, but is concerned with probability; and though every poet realizes that it is the interpenetration of the observer and the observed that gives rise to experience, yet it is the observer who alone awakes in him his instinctive affection. That is to say, the object that science speaks of is nothing certain but has to be inferred; it is a thing so devoid of attributes that even our cognition, not to speak of our consciousness, is governed by phenomena; and not only are these phenomena different for different people, the same phenomenon may produce such varied reactions in a particular individual that it becomes ludicrous in psychology even to talk about causes and effects. Because of the vicissitude of the things from which poetry makes its living, poets, non-residents in the Platonic republic, may or may not get bread and water in it, but on account of it their profits are certainly greater than their losses in the contingent world.

For, when even specious links are absent between their inner and outer worlds, they do not repeat old feelings even under conventional circumstances, but make use of the ancient and universal symbols in new self-realizations; and in Bishnu Dey's case too there has been no exception to this rule: it is with the help of such familiar images as the river and the forest, the cloud and the hill, the sea and the sky, night and day, that he has indicated the unprecedented components of his distinctive erotic feeling. Moreover, it is our thanks that he deserves for this, there being no scope here to express our surprise; and anybody with the slightest knowledge of psycho-analysis knows that inasmuch as a handful of psychical projections are vehicles of infinite suggestion, in the analysis of the meanings of dreams the exterior forms of mental images are merely minor, their

self-consistency and mutual relationships being of primary significance. Unfortunately the nineteenth-century poets did not keep this truth in mind; continuously seeing in front of their eyes the unexpected expansion of science, they naturally forgot that according to Wordsworth himself precious experiences do not constitute poetry's capital, but that the Muse of Poetry builds her nest in the well-woven webs of emotions collected in the memory; and because Bengali critics of poetry are adopted sons of that nineteenth century, they value *Balaka* more than *Kshanika*.[4] But world literature is a witness against them; and if one engages in aesthetic judgment according to the directions of the logical, truth-seeking intellect, not only does folk-literature seem incoherent, eccentric fancies of surrealism appear even in the consolidated classicism of China and Japan.

Hence, like the seeker of spiritual truth, the lover of poetry too must forsake pride in the intellect; and the true enjoyer who succeeds in doing so is no longer afraid of so-called complexities; rather his self-surrender engenders a fervent companionship between the reader and the writer. Then one realizes that even in the nineteenth century, which had deviated from tradition, it was not the clarity of the underlying theme or the gravity of the matter in hand that endowed poetry with life, but that it was the poet's distinctive personality that bestowed that dignity on poetry, personality being, at least according to the French, even more intimately related to style than Hari is with Hara.[5] As a result in that country[6] the unrestricted entry of neologisms into dictionaries is forbidden and unlimited freedom in making new syntactical experiments in literary works is unnecessary; and in spite of this Corneille and Racine are not identical, Browning and Tennyson being more similar than they. That is probably why Wordsworth and Shelley revealed such fundamental difference between themselves when they wrote poems

[4] Books of poems by Tagore. The poems of *Balaka* were composed about fourteen years after those of *Kshanika*.

[5] Hari is another name for Vishnu and Hara another name for Shiva. Vishnu and Shiva are basically identical, being two different aspects or manifestations of the same Supreme Divinity.

[6] i.e., France.

on the same theme, the skylark; and just as the former's youthful lapse made him hypocritical, so did the latter's adolescent lawlessness finally turn into a cosmic revolt. On the other hand, personality has no connections with the mysteries of previous existences; and since our distinguishing features are the fruits of our education, which is controlled by others, and of fortuitously acquired prejudices, man cannot, despite a hundred efforts to that direction, maintain a tortoise-like idiosyncrasy and isolation: the imprints of the current social order betray themselves through all his activities. Poets who are wont to search their own souls are therefore not interested in art for art's sake; and they avert their faces from the external world because literature and journalism are universally held to be polarities in the same way as an excessive dalliance with material objects is a hindrance to cosmic vision.

It is better to compare the poet to the palaeontologist who sees the whole life-history of an aeon in a fragment of a fossilized skull; and if this is not forgotten, even the apparently incoherent mode of expression found in modern poetry does not seem delirious and one realizes that even self-sufficing fancies are somehow or other partakers of universality. That is to say, as the poet is dependent on his environment for his thoughts and feelings as well as for what he learns and is taught, he does not, even in the irrelevant references he makes, proclaim his excessive erudition, but at the most indicates the maximum heights of the contemporary consciousness. Even those who deliberately set out to undermine society are not exempted from this general law; for, according to philosophers even absence is positive, and though to this day it is the knowledge of Brahman alone which has negative statements[7] as its one and only path, yet logically speaking there is all the difference in the world between absence of opposition on the one hand and non-dualism on the other. Hence it is impossible for the poet to save his life by running away; and just as in old age a guilty conscience manifests itself in puritanism, so it is people devoted to

[7] Literally, 'saying "not this".' Brahman, the Absolute or the Ultimate Reality can be described only in a series of negative statements summarized by *neti neti*, i.e., 'not this, not this'.

the world like Wilde who sing breathlessly in praise of pure art. But even then subject-matter does not stop making itself a nuisance: however the writer may object, Nature herself takes her revenge at last and everywhere affairs of the world finally win. However, the material of poetry may not always be apprehended by the senses and frequently all that one can say of it is that it is itself, no more, no less; and therefore the appeal of poetry, though bearing the signature of the *Zeitgeist*, changes from age to age, and it becomes clear that the poet's sense of proportion is another name for the critic's sense of values.

Hence at present a pursuit of poetry which lies outside the limits of subject-matter belongs to the same category as a person's impersonal striving for his liberation; and just as true immersion in the self comes only when the mental faculties are held in perfect control, in the same way poetry fulfils itself only when it gets rid of temporary props and reaches soliloquizing emotion. I believe that this noble truth holds good for Bishnu Dey's best compositions; and though, like all other urges to action, his poetic genius too bestirs itself through circumstantial reasons, that excitement does not goad him to write an autobiography but makes him seek a comprehensive situation which would not only bear the seal of his own feelings but would also foster in harmony many more layers of similar experiences. Of course the boundaries of such a wide area are naturally uncertain; and the proper realization of it is more arduous than the imagination of it is painful. Moreover, Bishnu Dey's ideals and practices cannot always keep pace with each other: on rare occasions he too uses poetry for self-advertisement; in his case too cogitation and perception are now and then impeded by the allurement of easily obtained applause; and knowing how laborious it is to blend the determined purpose with acquired experience and knowledge got through study, sometimes he too has recourse to swift stratagems. But where he is truly successful, as in the majority of the poems in *Chorabali*,[8] he is without a rival; and though these compositions

[8] *Chorabali*, by Bishnu Dey, published by Bharatibhavan. *Chorabali* means 'quicksands'.

require several diligent readings, yet they are indeed so felicitous that far-sighted readers will certainly forget the travails of their journey in the excess of their enjoyment. They will then understand that Bishnu Dey's writings are more or less complicated precisely because his responsible pen is not restless with the frenzy of self-exhibition; and inasmuch as even in moments of post-coital depression he does not worry about self-deception, but remembering the famous likening of sexual union to merging with Brahman, bursts out laughing, even an intimate emotion like love is in his poetry a stage for the play-actings of society and civilization.

Plato have I read, yet
Not understood Suresh's
Life-of-the-mind.
Does he wander, seeking
In this city,
In the shadow of hair done high,
In ears veiled by hair,
In the jingle of bracelets,
In dark theatres, hand in hand,
Diotima? As Socrates sought?
What does Bertrand Russell have to say?
Or the American Ben Lindsey?

There were two poets, bachelors both
(In public as far as I know):
Wordsworth and Coleridge;
The person who saved them, showed them the way
From the polluted boudoirs of the eighteenth century
And the forest-fires of revolution,
With awakened eyes, mind fine with wisdom,
Her name
Is not Schlegel or Hegel,
But it is Dorothy as far as I know.
That Dorothy is not in this crowd of Lilys and Romas and Alokas,
In evenings colourful with the enchantment of recorded music,
On car seats twilight-charmed,
That is films where the air is a-flutter with kisses
Diotima may not be found, have these been proved at all?

(*Shikhandir Gan*=*The Song of Shikhandi*, pp. 73-4)

The best example of this concise generalization is the poem called *Ophelia;* and whether reading it may or may not satisfy the curiosity of those who always want to know what happens off-stage, experienced readers will certainly be captivated by the variety of delights it offers. For though *Ophelia* belongs externally to the category of lyrics, its thematic elaboration is worthy of a five-act drama; and in it the poet has not only collected the essential substance of the long life-story of the archetypal lover, but at the same time has shown that no party is responsible for the unhappy conclusion of this particular fairy tale, the heritage of original sin in every social creature making the tragedy here inevitable. Yet the entry of tragedy into our daily lives is forbidden; for though there is no end of lamentable events there, through all that affliction man finds out the workings of causes and effects or learns how to correct mistakes; and as for that spiritual chastening, fascination for which makes the theatre-goer rush repeatedly to tragic performances, there is no scope for that inner agony in the sorrows and vexations of everyday life. For this reason the heroes and heroines of tragedies, though in reality mouthpieces of the secret realizations of the dramatists, are all, without exception, partakers of an unearthly glory; and since Bishnu Dey's Ophelia too is no mere mortal woman with the limitations of nature but a symbol of sovereign inaccessibility, the poet has not talked to her himself but has accepted the mediation of the superhuman Hamlet. Hence not only has the shadow of Shakespeare's universal humanism fallen on the tiny pool of his personal sense of privation, but it is through his efforts that another sky-gazing lamp has been lit in the dense darkness of the Hamletian mystery. Of course the oil and the wick for this new lamp have been provided by Freud and Wilson Knight. But in this case Bishnu Dey's achievement is not mean either: the body of the lamp is entirely his own; and the serenity of a person who does not forget his own vocation even when studying, which means studying other people, is naturally indisputable.

Death we have not conquered, nor in life within our arms
Have we yet bound the love-god[9] and his bride together.
In the red light of setting suns, in dew-white dawns
Still peaceless is our roaming.

Liberation glimmers in your skyroving eyes, those distant birds,
In your hands the peace of snow: scatter it once in rain.
Fly your heart in the sky, let life be snow.

Bring impudent love in up-raised hands.
In evening skies with summer's stormy laughter
Attack the illusion of death.

Indeed it was laughter you brought.
Behind the silken clouds I did not notice
The comings and goings of the thunder.

The wall round the kingdom of the gods has collapsed
On the human earth itself!
It was in your eyes that my comet, this all-consuming universe
Found its utmost goal.

(*Ophelia*, pp. 26-7)

To speak the truth, I know of no other Bengali poet who is capable of creating anything so very original with material so alien to himself; and the culmination of this unique method is in the poem entitled *Cressida*. For here he has not been content merely to create the dramatic symmetry of antithetical and parallel themes, but has created a comprehensive universe where Chaucer, Henryson and Shakespeare are of equal value. Moreover, he has not attempted to make this impossible task possible just to show off his sleight-of-hand; it is on account of the rapid increase in his thoughts and feelings with regard to love that each of the illustrious poets mentioned above, when considered individually, has appeared incomplete to him. It now seems disgraceful to him that the relenting sidelong glance of the beloved should induce oblivion of the world; he is no longer prepared to accept that the self-surrender of the desired

[9] Literally, the bodiless god. The god of love is so called as in mythology he was burnt to ashes by the wrath of Shiva, but was later revived.

woman assuages the aches and smarts of life's disease; and so he is not attracted by the Shakespearean death-wish at Cressida's treachery: a Chaucerian will to live makes him survive the wound inflicted by the enemy's weapon and resume family life. Memory, however, does not stop playing its pranks so easily; in spite of everything, at times Cressida's shadowy image hurts like a sword while he is in the arms of the newly married wife; and then like half-civilized tribes he does not distinguish between love and war, impulsively concluding that universally adored woman to be the disastrous Kurukshetra[10] incarnate. But according to Bishnu Dey this delusion of Troilus is not sad, his real tragedy being the fact that even after surviving the ordeal by fire he remains a plaything of Time; and time does not increase man's sense of values but decreases his memory. So in the end he follows Henryson's footsteps; and though it was for morality's sake that Henryson made Cressida suffer from leprosy, yet in the mutual encounter of the hero and the heroine after many years and without the knowledge of each other's identity it is perhaps the following truth that Bishnu Dey has observed: that in the journey of life there is no going back, and that though we do indeed continually look backwards from the force of habit, yet in practice it is against human nature to accord a warm ovation to the resurrected past.

Did you think you would make me quite mad?
My mind hasn't even gone crazy yet.
On my armour of worldly will-power
Your spear has broken into fragments.

The blue of the hills has merged with the current of grey clouds,
The blue of the five hills.
The winds have all fled home from the clutches of the clouds.
Still and unruffled the waters of the five lakes.

[10] The great war that lies at the centre of the *Mahabharata* and is the setting of the *Bhagavadgita*. It is waged between the two groups of royal cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. It is the Pandavas' just war against the Kauravas who attempted to usurp the throne. Nearly all contemporary royal houses in India participate in it, and after eighteen days of fierce conflict in which most of the fighters on either side are killed, the Pandavas are victorious. The victory is dearly bought, the battlefield being a scene of utter destruction, and the women raise a wail of lamentation for their dead.

You went away with lips dumb and indifferent,
Lured by the enchanter, Death the wizard.
Then from the battle-churnings came the woman of a far-off alien
land.
In the dark evening offered two white arms—

Even today your memory hurts like a sword.

(*Cressida*, pp. 91-2)

It is needless to say that poems are essentially indescribable; at least it is impossible to elucidate them in prose; and since I regard *Ophelia* and *Cressida* as excellent poetry I am not pretending to disclose their inmost meanings but have so far only expressed my personal reactions to them. A person's reactions, however, are conditioned by his intelligence and acquired learning; and a reader who is more well-read than me will find a great deal more in those two poems. For although my ignorance of anthropology and the new psychology makes me unable to assess the influence of these sciences on the two poems, I too know very well that an admirer of Eliot like Bishnu Dey never writes poetry from a mere inner urge but, in search of suitable objective correlatives to his emotions, tours extensively in all the directions of modern culture. In these circumstances he is bound to lose sight of his aim now and then; and in my judgment a knowledge of the origin of epilepsy is certainly unnecessary for the enjoyment of the poem *Apasmar* (=*Epilepsy*), and further, even if one happens to know Kretschmer's comment on that disease, one cannot connect Vichitravirya or Dasharatha[11] with the self-forgetfulness induced by the sexual act.

Has no golden girl
Tied your heart with her feet?

[11] Vichitravirya is the common grandfather of the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the *Mahabharata;* he is consumptive. Dasharatha is the father of Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana;* in an important episode he suffers from an ulcer and is cured by one of his wives who sucks the pus away with her own lips. Dasharatha promises to grant her a boon, which leads to a major complication in the plot.

Have you heard no lullabies
Pillowed on Jaratkari's[12] thighs?
Removing all fierce wants,
Has Aladdin not lighted his lamp?
Has any ancestor,
Vichitravirya or Dasharatha,
Left behind as a present
The unashamed heritage
Of the burden of tubercular decay
Or a festering ulcer bequeathed by drugs?
Is that why you sought
The azure of sleep in Vaitarani[13]
Moment by moment a spiritual defeat!
All quarters as empty as mirages!
Is that why you sought in your blood
Revolution even through epilepsy,
Chill, blue, extending to the underworld?

(*Apasmar*, p. 59)

However, such a failure in assimilation is not for Bishnu Dey; and where he is truly successful, his action and speech are undistracted, his intuition and scholarship intense and his inner and outer worlds identical. Then his erudition no longer seems irrelevant, even the concepts of science and philosophy becoming evocative of images; and afterwards, whether the inexperienced may or may not have his eyes of knowledge opened, at least those who are sympathetic respond heartily to the call of intuitively enlightening suggestion. The most important example of this magic is the poem *Chorabali*; and even those to whom myth-scientists like Jung are mere names will realize that the horseman and the quicksand are not merely symbolic of sexual desire, but that it is natural and fitting to see in them the relationship between the masculine and feminine principles of Divinity or between God and adoring man.

Into the sea of men rushes the flood-tide,
In my heart is a sandbank.

[12] Even when bitten by a scorpion, Jaratkari did not move for fear of waking her husband who was sleeping with his head on her lap.

[13] Mythological river encircling the underworld, the Lethe of Indian poets.

I, quicksand, in the distant horizon call—
Where is the horse-rider?
Luminous world-conqueror! Lift your spear.
Wherefore fear? Why forget the hero's faith?
Do the ceaseless ups and downs darken in your eyes?
Do I, quicksand, in the distant horizon call?
Is there a sandbank in my heart?
Do I not retain anybody's seal on my limbs?
In the moonlight all rippled is the sandbank.
Are no bridal chambers ever built here?
Am I a mirage calling to the distant horizon?
Does the fiery self-sacrifice for ever remain undone?
Churn clamour from the sea of men
And anoint your forehead.
On the ocean's crown the salt waters in a ferment.
In my heart the sandbank of some sickness.
I, quicksand, call in the distant horizon,
Where is manhood then?
O my beloved! My most beloved!
For many a smile trembles the darkening of desire,
Will you not press your seal on my limbs?
In the tenuous breeze hold your lance aloft.
Across the shores of seven seas and fourteen rivers—
In the tenuous breeze fill both your hands with my heart,
With sudden rashness burst open the timid door.
Here the mountains in the tenuous breezes weave
Hopes of a stormy avalanche in the mind.
My desire in the guise of a shadowy figure
Follows at your heels brushing your body.
The thin air quivers, shivering with desire.
With desire's tension taut is the glacier.
In the tenuous breeze hold my heart,
O stranger from afar, world-conqueror, luminous horse-rider!

(*Chorabali*, pp. 21-2)

But Bishnu Dey has not written only one kind of poetry; and though, on account of my own narrow taste, I have spent so many words on those of his poems which are pregnant with various meanings, it is clear and straightforward poems which are in a majority in the present book. It is, however, unnecessary to spend too much time on them; and while even there Bishnu

Dey's creations of drama are all too brief, that drama, being frequently historical or farcical, is rich in puns and innuendoes but has little scope to express a variety of meanings or to transcend its topics. Perhaps that is the reason why these poems attract me to a relatively less degree; and however delighted I may be by an accurate delineation of society, I have a Teutonic mind which cannot by any means cast off the spell of generalization, and looking all the time at the background, forgets the existence of the picture itself. Of course it is the milieu which is the life of a social sketch; and even in satirical poems like *Shikhandi*[14] or *Kabikishor* (=*The Adolescent Poet*) Bishnu Dey is not amused by the accidental juxtapositions of men and women: it is their mental inconsistencies that have awakened his scorn. But at the same time one must remember that unlike Cressida or Ophelia, these destitute girls like Lily, Roma or Aloka have not been lucky enough to secure a drop of compassion from Bishnu Dey; either he does not know, or though he knows, he does not admit, that a worldly law is operative even in the poverty of these people; and as a result they have not succeeded in becoming examples of his *Weltanschauung* but have only provided in themselves objects of his negative contempt. Moreover, he himself is not without anxiety about this disdain; his indifference is often a means to causeless self-laudation; and therefore even when a snobbish sense of alienation makes him stand apart from the company of people like Suresh, his ridicule sounds like regret, and one cannot make out when he is laughing and when weeping.

Each moment of mine incarnates the bitter, jejune,
Indefatigable mockery of the cruel, snake-hooded Durvasa[15] universe.
The sun offers its dower of meaningless and transparent sarcasm,
Daybreak attacks with the inflammation of sleepless kisses.
I have forgotten what my mistake was: my days are despondent and
    weary
Like forests leafless with autumn's leprosy.

[14] A character in the *Mahabharata*.

[15] A very irascible hermit in Indian legend. His curse on Shakuntala lies at the centre of Kalidasa's *Abijnamashakuntala*.

Each morning I know that my day, failure-wounded,
Will in vain merge with the night, this life being a sigh.
In the lake I floated amongst you, among your ripples,
Alas, woman, alas, the burns from the conflagration of Khandava[16]
did not heal!
Nor in the shadow of the dense lashes of kohl-deep deer-eyes
Came life-giving spring decked with green foliage
With the breath of Chaitra[17] winds to my barren, wintry soul.

(*Kabikishor*, pp. 46-7)

On the other hand, from the point of view of technique these poems of his are almost impeccable; and although he has shown extraordinary metrical skill even in serious poetry, yet in their marvellous reconciliation of discipline and freedom it is his light poems that have proved themselves capable of accomplishing the impossible. Consequently his verse, though everywhere conforming to rigorous rules, is nowhere frigid; not only do Sanskrit words easily fit into it, even English words do not sound incongruous in it; and in his hands so-called prose poetry becomes an example of his magnificent restraint: its syllabic distributions are so astonishing that the reader may read it as either prose or verse as he likes.

In your love's gloaming where is the light? The assurance
of Platonic muscles is not at hand. You go to spread Christian
friendship, in the disillusionment of the present, in the
seeds of the future celestial flower. Philanthrope, just by
the lamp is the play of the darkness, all round it is the
light. Me you took, took after virtually wiping out Surangama's
colourful universe. It was in your nature to move out of the ancestral
home: what strange modes work in this Kailas[18] I wonder.

(*Dwidhadampati*,[19] p. 61)

[16] A terrible forest-fire which is an important episode in the *Mahabharata*.
[17] The second month of spring, corresponding to the period from mid-March to mid-April.
[18] The holy mountain, the Himalayan abode of Shiva and his consort.
[19] The word may be translated as 'the couple whose ways have diverged in two different directions'.

But look, my mind is indifferent,
Not in Mathur,[20] but slack of muscle.
In prose therefore let me say:
No, darling, this is not an alternative.
It is *your* love that trembles
On my love's one and only meditative peak.
Not even the shadow of a second person do I tread upon,
To oscillate between One and Many[21] is indeed against my nature.
The possibility for more than One arises in *your* mind,
In the cultivation of primitive woman's rightfully owned land.

(*Unmana*,[22] p. 80)

Yet he has never paid for this freedom by forgetting the colloquial style, has not generally ignored the rules and regulations of grammar and has always kept in mind that the language of poetry, whether prose or verse, must be a living thing; and just as a living language is at the same time something spoken by the people and something stamped with the individual's character, so a living rhythm is the synthesis of universal emotion and unique feeling. Of course, in spite of this, it is not possible to equate rhythm with technique; and although the aural purity shown in Bishnu Dey's own use of beat, tempo and pause is astonishing, yet his joining of sentences is at times faulty, his misuse of verbs more or less disconcerting, and his choice of words, though highly suggestive, does not to that extent agree with dictionaries. It is however doubtful whether the many layers of significance could have been expressed together in any other way; and the contorted technique of the following poem is not a hindrance but a help to our understanding of its meaning.

If my fine-arty compositions have in any way offended
By plagiarism, beloved mine, your eyes veiled by lashes;

[20] Mathur is the name for Krishna's princely exploits in Mathura when he left Radha and the cowherdesses in Vrindavan to fulfil his mission of killing the tyrant king of Mathura.

[21] There is a suggestion of oscillating between dualism and nondualism in philosophy.

[22] The word may be translated as 'absent-minded' or 'listless', but also suggests some anxiety and restlessness.

If my compositions have failed to execute the charm
Of your delicate white body; if the dream-soft shadows of your eyes
Have not successfully granted catalytic favours to my work;
If on the gates and steeple of my fancy's temple people descry
The novel cunning depth, the unique shrewdness of your laughter;
Yet will they say: He has never through fear, vexation, error or grief
Paid toll to death. It is life's joy that he has wished to embrace.
My incompetence is a shame; yet, beloved, all calumny will be trivial—
Only my incompetence is a taint: and also that I have made you its occasion.

(*Panchamukh*,[23] p. 29)

Further, the rimes in the above poem are certainly fine, but since similar success has often eluded him, his alliteration and the agreement between the terminal sounds in his rime-words are generally conventional, while more elaborate sonic repetitions are carelessly executed; and if against these objections he poses the names of many a great poet and contends that the artificial pauses induced by end-rime prevent the experience of the natural undulation of sounds, the objection raised against him will then be that he has not made enough good use of Owenian irregularities. At least in his long poems the presence or absence of rimed verse is regulated not by necessity but by opportunity; and where rimes do occur, if the reader's rapturous attention is not disturbed by disyllabic repetitions, it can certainly endure correspondences involving three or four syllables as well.

However that may be, there is no end to this sort of carping: even towering figures are wounded through and through with the arrows of calumny; and if one girds up one's loins and sets oneself to fault-finding, the faults of not only Bishnu Dey but of any writer will make a list longer than the *Mahabharata*. But right in the beginning I have said that modesty and sympathy are the greatest ornaments of learning and culture; and those who are real lovers of poetry will not need arguments to be convinced that since Bishnu Dey has played his own tunes even

[23] One who has five faces, hence five mouths; often synonymous with 'garrulous'.

on a Tagorean instrument like the *matrachhanda* metre, his genius is indubitable, his excellence obvious and he deserving of our gratitude. For though metrical[24] freedom is the key principle in modern poetry, the conversation of one person is different from another's not by virtue of words but by virtue of the articulation of words; and while this individuality in the manner of articulation is easier to attain in prose than in verse, the distinction of a person whose characteristic voice is not drowned by the unison of verse is certainly indisputable. Hence in my judgment the only certificate of poetic genius is metrical facility; and since evaluation is governed by the wishes of Time and the discoverer of the true weight of meaning is the kindred spirit who has not yet made his appearance, consideration of the metre is the unerring standard by which contemporary poetry is to be judged. From this point of view Bishnu Dey's contribution is extraordinary; and that is why, in spite of the fact that we have, naturally enough, divergent views and ways, his poetry does nothing but delight me. Further, I believe that this delight has nothing to do with friendship, that on the contrary Bishnu Dey certainly deserves the impartial cheers of those who do not personally expect anything from him.

In your eyes gleam intoxicating magic.
Breast-peaks overshadow the slender waist.
Dream-charioteer, is the gateway visible yet?—
A beckoning to immortal regions in your eyes.
The Tropical circle merges with the North Pole.
Mahashweta,[25] have you forgotten me today?
On the nectar-amphora of drunken lips
Memories and oblivions like autumn rains pour.
Mahashweta, have you forgotten me today?
Your body is the Alakananda's[26] song.

[24] The Bengali word *chhanda* is used to mean both 'metre' and 'rhythm', thus creating ambiguities in certain contexts. In this paragraph *metre* and *metrical* could be replaced by *rhythm* and *rhythmic* without affecting the general sense.

[25] The young hermitess Mahashweta is an important character in Banabhatta's *Kadambari;* she saves Chandrapirh from death.

[26] In mythology the river Ganges is supposed to flow in three different streams, as Alakananda in the heaven of the gods, as Ganga on the earth and as Bhogavati in the underworld.

When in the waters of Achchod[27] you bathe,
With dream-revelations the troposphere shivers.
In your brilliant limbs the radiance of immortality.
An intense concentration of life's sun.
The troposphere shivers in the Tropical circle.
In your left hand is gestured assurance.
Cut asunder the darkness, conquer it.
Dream-charioteer, is the gateway visible yet?—
At my back pursues the death-moon's gleam,
The serpent's hood across the horizon, chill, pale, black.
Is the sandy shore of oblivion visible?
O heroic love-god, draw Nachiketa's[28] bow,
Bring me into the body's protective fortress—
Into your earthly arms, Mahashweta.

(*Mahashweta*, pp. 67-8)

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[27] In the *Kadambari* Mahashweta's hermitage is close to the translucent lake Achchod in the Himalayan region. For Bengalis, Achchod is immortalized in Tagore's *Bijoyini* (=The Victorious Woman), opening 'When woman in the waters of Lake Achchod/Stepped down for bathing....' The god of love was watching Mahashweta's bathing and meant to pierce her with his arrow, but his frivolity left him when he faced her and he bowed in humility in front of the serene majesty and purity of the naked hermitess.

[28] The phrase 'Nachiketa's bow' seems to be modelled on 'Nachiketa's fire', the mode of worship by fire ascribed to Nachiketa, the young boy in the Katha Upanishad who obtained from Yama, the god of Death, the knowledge of immortality and the mystery of life and death. See also the footnote on page 213 on the love-god. The whole line may be glossed as: 'O heroic disembodied god of Love, avert the fiery wrath of Shiva and answer him back with Nachiketa's fire, conquer your death, forsake your soft flower-bow and draw a death-conquering bow, be as the youthful Nachiketa was when face to face with the god of Death.'

An Introduction to Rabindranath's Genius

Whether great poets are men born at auspicious moments or not, many of them are alive and thriving even in these days of cultural crisis; and if we could to some extent reduce the quantity of our contempt for contemporaries, we would not have found marks of greatness only in the distant past, but would have regarded the moderns too as men of achievement. However, even so-called indisputable rules have their exceptions; and therefore, in spite of the above-mentioned general rule, of all living authors, at least in India, only one person is comparable to the ancients. He is Rabindranath; and as his rank is with Vyasa, Valmiki, Homer or Dante, the moderns round him are as lustreless as are the planets and their satellites round the sun. Yet ultimately he too is under the aforesaid rule; and today he does not appear to be peerless by virtue of special achievements, but is still unparalleled in the expanse of his entire evolution.

That is to say, if we consider every stage of the whole event of his maturing, we cannot but admit that in many fields not only have his successors kept time with him in their steps, but also at times they have returned to the decisive end-beats earlier than he; and the fact that there is no suggestion of modern rashness in this proud conclusion of mine may be corroborated by the first volume of the newly-published complete works of Rabindranath.[1] It is needless to say that this does not mean that the first part of this handsome collection is, in my judgment, unreadable. But perhaps the poet himself thinks so; and that is why he has at last agreed to the publication of all his writings on the condition that the delirious effusions of his young days will not be placed within the main

[1] The Works of Rabindranath - Vol. 1 (*Visvabharati*).

body of his works, but will be put together as an appendix. In spite of it, many of the things that have entered this volume are immature, so immature that seekers of poetic fame in present times would hesitate a great deal before printing similar poems.

Yet to all admirers of Bengali literature as well as Bengali culture this volume will be of immense value; and anybody not entirely deprived of the historical sense must necessarily admit that if the results of such pioneer-like industry had not descended to the succeeding authors as their natural heritage, Bengali verse would have still followed the footsteps of Ishwar Chandra Gupta and only echoes of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar would have been heard in Bengali prose. Of course it is not to be doubted that these two names are ever-memorable to Bengalis; and if he keeps in mind the main principle of judgment of manners, even the ultramodern critic will not regard their works as examples of fantastic happenings. But the pleasures that they offer are chiefly intellectual and impartial; their qualities are impersonal and classical; and their dignified manner of expression as well as their rigid objectivity are so obsolete in the present social condition that we rather find delight in ancient Sanskrit literature, or regard as akin to us the Padavali-writers of old, yet cannot bear these two nineteenth-century authors.

On the other hand they represent a way of life whose predominance, although it has disappeared from our drawing-rooms, is still unchanged in our inner apartments; and one has to admit that, just as in the activities that express their virtue there are no stamps of distinct individuality, similarly their ideas and ideals are confined to what is customary and have not spread their roots among direct experience. And yet they are objects of our respectful admiration. For however much the moderns may rant about the narrowness of the forefathers, today it is undeniable that, without the government of conventions, Michael Madhusudan Datta's unbridled nature would have always remained undisciplined and would have never expressed itself in permanent verse; and although, because Michael's writings are apparently restless with the intoxi-

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cation of a revolt, it may seem in an external consideration that it is he who is the usherer of a new age, yet when we look a little deeper, we cannot retain this belief. Then it becomes clear that he is modern only in technique, and that it is not only his subject-matter that is traditional, but that the inner inspiration which makes him a poet is also entirely objective and therefore fit to be called classical.

Actually among Bengali men of letters it was Bankimchandra Chatterjee who first lost his patience at the torture of the conventional; and although, because of the lack of organized effort, his revolt was not successful in aesthetic expression, yet since he was, apart from intimate friends, the first to appreciate Rabindranath's genius, it may be justly inferred that his rebellion was not sham, that he heartily wanted an uprooting of the existing organization. For Rabindranath is not merely the beginner of the subjective mode: it was by his life-long endeavours that Bengali poetry doffed its usual characteristics and came in front of the people as the Bengali version of Western literature; and although none of the few volumes of poetry which he published even before he was twenty-two may have displayed novelty of technique, yet each of them gave evidence that the poet's practice was completely free from preconceptions, so much so that he did not care for traditional poetic fictions even in eternal themes, but everywhere, forgetting all other things, he sought the union of realization and utterance.

Very probably behind that self-dependency hovered the temporary currency of Western events; and even without it, he would certainly not have been satisfied with self-expression only but would have endeavoured to ensure that there might be no lack of correspondence among his ideas in a given context, that his exposition might be free from redundance and that his metres might rid themselves of both looseness and stiffness. But it is doubtful whether he would have proceeded towards independence, treading on Bengali ground even, if he had not found corroboration from abroad with regard to what he was doing, and when at the age of fifteen he deliberately set himself to the work of imitation with the purpose of befooling a

certain pedant, no Bengali poet could supply him with a model; it was Vidyapati who fulfilled his need. For, once upon a time, Vidyapati too had lost his faith in the established system and had initiated a mode of expression which easily had upon it the seal of individual experience although it may not have had the grammarian's support in its convenient flexibility. And not only this; Vidyapati had leaned towards Vaishnavism even before Chaitanya.

At least on the face of it the Vaishnavas have always been supporters of individual dignity; and perhaps it is the reason why only this community within the entire Hindu society attracted Rabindranath all his life. The other Hindus, thanks to the system of the four castes and the four stages of life, had only learnt how to form factions; and with this factious spirit was mixed a general jealousy, among high and low alike, of the material wealth of the Tagore family. As a result the Pirilis were excluded from Hindu society on the excuse that their riches were the rewards of unmentionable anti-Hindu iconoclasticism; and although long before Rabindranath was born the activities of his forefathers had in many ways overcome that factious spirit, yet even then people would not dine with the Tagore family, a marriage outside their own circle would nearly ruin them and not very many people except whimsical or extra-courageous men would be friendly with them. In such a situation a precocious child is bound to change first into a sentimental boy and then into a rebellious young man, and in addition, because his elders, through the power of their natural genius, thought that the educational system introduced by Macaulay was suitable only for clerks, Rabindranath therefore never acquired even that quantum of devotion to the establishment which was characteristic of all educated people.

Moreover, he seldom had the good luck to have the companionship of children of his age; his brothers were so much older that he could not share their amusements; and the female relatives in whose company he passed his days produced such a sense of inferiority in him that he used to be glad to escape into the seclusion of the palace garden: there he would forget him-

self by feeling a kinship with non-human Nature. So in early childhood he became a practitioner like his elders; and when he could not rival his kinsmen in success even after adolescence, his mental distance from them naturally increased and it seemed to him that his intense thoughts and feelings were really priceless. Very soon this egoism revealed itself in his literary creations too; and before long not only did he assume the familiar language of domesticity to be superior to the current elegant style, but also in the meantime his self-confidence rose to such heights that he did not hesitate to publish all his writings without any corrections in rapid succession.

As a result his prose and verse seemed to be peculiarly fresh at least to the discriminating reader; and those who did not lose their confidence in the ancient literature in spite of it understood that the extravagant display of all Bengali writers irrespective of caste or creed was at the same time intolerable and inelegant. On the other hand a group of puristic critics too started a campaign against Rabindranath. His antipathy to the establishment had naturally incensed them. Now when they heard him talking to the public in a personal or domestic style they proclaimed that the faults of his manner of writing were negligible, but that the merits were obscure. And we must admit for truth's sake that for those who have been used to the objective correctness of classicism all their lives the effusive self-love of a romantic heart is more incomprehensible than vicious. But as the good taste of such unsympathetic people is praiseworthy, so is their blindness lamentable; and had they not lacked insight they would have certainly admitted that the obscurity of Rabindranath was not the product of any extraordinary experience, but that he was mysterious now and then because of the individuality of his manner of expression.

In fact Rabindranath is not one of those introspective people who luxuriate in sorrow. He has never been keen on superfine distinctions in feelings; and although his genius is subjective from beginning to end, yet his endless creative impulse is probably derived from the provisions of commonalty. In other words, Rabindranath's greatness too confirms the Freudian

hypothesis; according to Freud a man does not attain greatness by having only desire or capability, but he obtains that honour only when the essence of his personality changes into an abbreviated version of the essence of his nation. Hence, it is because his feelings are general, not particular, that Rabindranath has made Bengal a sharer in his individual sentiments; and that feeling is so universal, so sovereign, that its manifestation is understood not just by people speaking the same language: apparently foreigners are also capable of appreciating its spirit. That is why in Rabindranath's hand the Bengali language, having crossed the boundaries of provincialism, has become a vehicle of universal consciousness; and as a result of this development the language has of course lost its original characteristics, but the variety that can be seen in it now was even beyond dreaming in pre-Rabindranath days.

Of course local manners of sentence-construction, conventional ways of expressing meaning, associations of thought acceptable to all, and such other restrictions are not entirely harmful to a language; and because the absence of a recognized arrangement of words must reduce the perspicuity of any language, so in our attempts to increase the expressive and suggestive powers of modern Bengali we have lost the lucidity of old Bengali. Even then, perhaps it is the moderns who have finally won. The loss of old meanings has sharpened intentions; and further, the usual rhythmic rigidities of prose and verse having been destroyed, the language has gained so much elasticity that it is now easy for the Bengali to express differences of degree in thoughts and feelings by means of sound alone. Moreover, though the logicality of post-Rabindranath Bengali is not terribly remarkable, yet its graphic powers are really surprising; and above all, there are no distinctions between its ordinary dress and ceremonial costume. It no longer changes its guise in accordance with place, time and object; whatever it is wearing at home it keeps on even when roaming in the public highways.

Yet behind that ease there is no trace of alien self-will, there is the native frankness of confidential conversation. And that is

the reason why, in spite of good arguments, the objections of the traditionalists against Rabindranath have not ultimately held good and the whole of Bengal has learnt to speak in his way. Unfortunately only God is at the same time faultless and existent; elsewhere being and perfection are inversely proportionate; and however versatile the genius of a particular man may be, as he is existent, he cannot mature every sprout of promise that appears on the stem of his own activities. Therefore, although it is true that Rabindranath had freed himself from the spell of chaste Bengali through the pressure of intimate experience, yet in course of time the intoxication of shaping new idioms so overpowered him that he nearly forgot the use of his nature-given sensitivity and power of vision: his style lost its former simplicity and sought the shelter of self-conscious innuendo; he liquidized the capital of his old experiences and, mixing with it the alloy of figures of speech, charily continued his work of writing.

At least there is no doubt in the fact that in Rabindranath's mental life the importance of early youth is much greater than that of the mature years; and at the end of a long period of maturity, though he is not entirely devoid of curiosity with regard to the external world, yet his present attitude in that matter reminds one of the philosopher sunk in meditation uttering 'I am He', who, precisely because he is non-dualistic, is dispassionate in spite of possessing the senses. That is to say, in spite of having kept his powers of enjoyment intact up to the age of eighty and of having directed the course of literary progress to this day, Rabindranath has desisted from finding objective correlatives to his personal realizations these last forty years. Hence, in spite of universal compassion, in the matter of consciousness he is comparable to the Aristotelian God: thanks to the rigid allocation of domains of activity to different beings, no other course of action is available to these two but to immerse themselves in self-contemplation. However, self-immersion is attainable only through constant endeavour; and as long as he did not obtain success in this, his contemporaries used to get impatient at his garrulity, quite naturally.

But the discriminating reader, even before finishing the first volume of the Works of Rabindranath, will know the author to be subjective. Just as the *Letters from Europe*, written at the age of seventeen, are resonant with the easy surprises and simple questions of a precocious boy, in the same way *The Diary of a Traveller in Europe*, written at twenty-seven, is the opinion of a critic whose self-realization instinctively does not think much of the peacock's feathers of the foreign crow. In fact, after his early youth not even entire changes of situation were able to shake him outwardly; and although such steadfastness is the outward expression of inner flawlessness, yet as it is closely related to the impersonal dignity of the classicals, here too Rabindranath is not one who has swerved from his office but is an inheritor of the soul-substance of the universal man. However, this devotion to the self has not been obtained free, and his dramatic writings are relatively poor because they have had to pay the price for it.

For though in the modern world men as successful as Aeschylus no longer write dramas, modern dramatists must still identify themselves with the dramatis personae; and because Rabindranath, in spite of an abundance of imaginative sympathy, lacked faith in relationships of agreement, either in presence or in absence, between material events, his characters do indeed amaze us by the brilliance of their conversation, but in spite of the backing of an infectious atmosphere, they ultimately remain inactive like mechanically operated puppets. However that may be, a more active and many-sided author has not been born in Bengal before; and however much the successors may advance in self-laudation, even in the kingdom of feeling they have not found any path which does not bear the marks of his feet. This in fact is an account of the change that has come to Bengali literature after his conquests: of his boundless empire several plots of land have come into the possession of tenants, and those who are hard-working among them have only increased the quantity of crop in their respective areas but have not been able to change the quality of the produce.

Moreover Rabindranath is not memorable to the moderns as a leader only. Just as the present culture of Bengal is his creation alone, so also to this day he alone is the authenticator and director of that culture. For though the very recent *Weltanschauung* of the Bengalis is not made out of his own imaginations but is built through the combination of many ideals national and foreign, yet the language on which modern thoughts are dependent is one of the gifts of Rabindranath himself; and nearly all philosophers of present times have somehow or other admitted that, let alone accuracy, even the supreme truth is ultimately a matter of language. At least there is no doubt in this that the difference between poets and prophets is qualitative, precisely because poets are respected in their own countries. That is why, when polyglots claim that it is impossible to translate poetry, they show not a professional shrewdness but a genuine devotion to truth. Though he had faith in a superhuman good, Coleridge admitted that poetry does not care for the dictionary, that it shows itself in the most beautiful arrangement of the best words; and it is impossible to think of two languages between which a mutual exchange of significances is everywhere unobstructed.

Therefore to us the value of foreign poets is only in this: that if we know their names by heart our scholastic pride culls the praise of the common people; and though by reason of the novelty of subject-matter the Greeks provoke our respectful admiration in spite of the linguistic barriers, yet perhaps nobody can taste the flavour of Latin literature through translations. So much for the ancients. Things are more lamentable with the moderns. Praise of Racine rings in our ears as the cries of frogs in the well; Goethe in English is famous only for verbiage; outside Russia the works of Pushkin are the heights of adolescent exuberance. In my opinion Rabindranath belongs to the same category of great poets. At least like them he too did not hesitate to sacrifice experience at the altar of expression; and although his works are very often marvellously grand in the richness of their ideas, yet in them theme and technique are so interdependent that one harms both aspects if one tries to dissociate them.

So it is really impossible to translate Rabindranath's works. Moreover, though he is incomparable in intellect, he is by nature a dealer in the affairs of the heart; and as the ways of expressing aesthetic emotion in Bengali are in many respects different from those in English, the success of the English *Gitanjali* is not at all something that would have necessarily happened, but is entirely accidental. In spite of clear echoes of the Biblical language, the statements and suggestions of the English *Gitanjali* are somewhat uncertain; we do not get in it even a faint trace of that undoubted beauty of rhythm and other accessories that is invariably present in Rabindranath's most trivial Bengali compositions. Perhaps that is why even Bridges could not ruin a poem of the *Gitanjali* even though he corrected it from beginning to end. But Bridges was not a poet; and if he too could do such an impossible thing, certainly if a good poet took on himself the task of translation in the future, he might partially redeem the injustice that irresponsible translation has done to Rabindranath and thus to Bengali literature. But even that translator will have to admit that Rabindranath's Bengali is a novel language, that on all its body it has the stamp of his entire personality, and to want to know him without knowing his language is more ludicrous than teaching the art of navigation to the desert-dweller.

To speak the truth, though Rabindranath is one of the first preachers of international unity, yet his true achievement is his intense self-realization; if we forget this and regard him as a leviathan in the sphere of modern knowledge and *Zeitgeist*, we only reveal our blind admiration but do not increase his prestige. Indeed, in the field of knowledge he is not even a pioneer, but a follower of Rammohan Roy and other discoverers. And though without his efforts the Bengali's powers of enjoyment would have still remained in the conventional grooves, yet his liberalism is not unprecedented. From Wordsworth to Swinburne all romantic poets have displayed similar attitudes. On the other hand it is not correct to regard him as a preacher of Eastern philosophy: the materialistic West has not understood the value of inner vision from his words; on the

contrary the sluggards of the East have shared the spiritual heritage of the West through him.

As a result of it their situation is like Trishanku's: they are uprooted from their country and at the same time cannot spread their roots in an alien soil. For this reason their stifled regrets are both natural and fruitless. However it is not Rabindranath who is responsible for that emptiness; it is the character and tradition of the Bengalis. And if like him, we too can some day get rid of the old habit of accepting the calumnious words of one person from the mouth of another, we shall not die of heart-break, at least not through the lack of a language: we may preach gospels of liberation even while obeying the rules of Bengali grammar. Rabindranath alone has opened the door of that possibility in front of Bengalis. And so future Bengalis, even when they are denying his authority, will be acknowledging their gratitude to him. Those on the other hand who may chance to think that the detailed discussion of Rabindranath's works would be the duty of future antiquarians only would also be making a big mistake; for if the moderns do not know the true image of Rabindranath they will not know even themselves.

Therefore it is that Vishvabharati, by having published an authentic version of all his writings together, has earned the gratitude of the whole of Bengal; and however much Rabindranath is self-dependent, since he is not self-begotten, we shall not only understand the gradual development of the Bengali language by studying in proper sequence the entire history of his development, we shall even learn to what extent the intellectual powers of the Bengalis have changed or are changing along with the linguistic changes. A wide circulation of Rabindranath's Works is therefore especially desirable; and the publishers, by having kept the prices as low as possible, have given every one of us an opportunity to buy these volumes. It is superfluous to mention that the edition is worthy of the poet-emperor: if paper and printing of such good quality are available at such a low cost, the general ugliness of Bengali books is wholly unpardonable. If the Bengali's sense of beauty had not

already been squeezed under the pressure of his indifference, our publishers would have probably shown more dexterity and sense of responsibility in this matter.

1939

Utterance and Realization

The Tradition of Writing in Bengal

Though the difficulty in literary endeavour of reconciling what one wishes to do and what one can do makes my own writings obscure, yet it is lucid writing that I personally love to read. The definition of simplicity is, however, relative; and as it is the identity of the man and the manner that is the radical principle of artistic creation, however much an unelaborate language may be suitable for the fairy tale, the exposition of a difficult subject in a similar fashion would be unnatural and misleading. That is to say, the generalizations of common sense cannot always reach at the truth; and though it is generalities that science seeks, a conclusion that covers a lot of ground is more valuable in scientific consideration than a simple generalization. Thus Einstein's definition of gravitation does not have the perspicuity of Newton's; and according to Einstein the dream of neat prettiness befits the embroiderer alone: the speculations of one who is addicted to objective truth are different. Of course it is still open to debate whether language is the vehicle of thought or the director of thought; and as long as that dispute remains unsettled, it is impossible to give a precise definition of the quality of lucidity. In spite of this, a manner that is characterized by clarity in all contexts must be rare; and when this characteristic claims the whole of a language, it becomes certain that a society which has enjoyed the convenience of this state will not appreciate the spirit of an independent person. Hence the simple sentence-construction of the Bengali may be an indication of his lazy mentality; and in spite of using the pen for five hundred years he has not succeeded in bringing within his control the object of direct perception or in investing multilateral thoughts with the discipline of reasoning.

For Bengali prose is only a hundred years old; and the verse

through which our emotions used to be expressed before that period was also mainly auditory. Of course in all countries grammar, syntax and such other things are relatively simpler in poetry; and the themes of recitative ballads must necessarily be so familiar to the audience that this kind of composition is really impersonal, or else the activity of the entire community. On the other hand as old Bengali poetry used to live away from the eyes of the people, it was not ashamed of looseness; and as metrical lapses used to be corrected by the declamatory sing-song, so confusions in case-endings as well as syntactical illogicalities used to be covered up by the clever gesticulations of the bard. That is probably why even the Sanskritists who preceded Michael Madhusudan had not dared to introduce blank verse; as for rimed verse, the consonance of terminal sounds alone was enough for it and nobody minded any other dissonance. Moreover, in spite of the system of the four castes and the four stages of life and communal conflicts, stratification was not really excessive in the society of that period; and although the sophisticated and the uneducated differed quantitatively in their powers of artistic appreciation, no qualitative difference would be discernible between them. Needless to say, such mutual tolerance is the characteristic of a rural culture; and though during the Muslim rule one did not have to perform Vedic rites to atone for the sin of having set foot in Bengal, yet in the unorthodox atmosphere of this land which was left out even by the Pandavas in their itinerations the feudal lords could not retain their allegiance to the throne and incurred the anger of the emperor at Delhi by fraternizing with the local people. Consequently the luxury of the Mughal court did not touch the Bengali's heart; and thinking his distinctive way of life to be excluded from the governance of the State, he managed to go through the official work in an alien language.

The emergence of folk art is natural in this situation, for folk art everywhere serves conventional needs; and material for artistic creation was so scanty in this land, that had not the foundations of the British empire been laid in it, the connoisseurs of the place would have probably been still content to

ruminate over already threadbare topics. However, the simultaneity of inner and outer worlds is so difficult to bring about that even in the middle of the nineteenth century the rapidly growing urban civilization had not come within the compass of the Bengali language; and when Bankimchandra Chatterjee was first inspired to write a novel, he had no other way but to seek the refuge of English. Luckily, however advanced he was in scholarship, his mind was orthodox; hence he shut out the contemporary world from the next series of his books and did indeed speak in Bengali for the rest of his life, though the manner of that Bengali appears highly Sanskritized to us, while his contemporaries had seen in it the blind imitation of a foreign mode. That is to say, Bankimchandra is not the last representative of provincial Bengal, but is one of the pioneers of the cosmopolitan present; and the sequence of the old Bengali tradition, the origin of which is buried in oblivion, finishes really with Madhusudan, although he did try to make our medieval religious verse flow into the channels of the Western epic. Hence, in spite of her exotic costume, the heroic Tara[1] is most Bengali; and Debjani,[2] unembarrassed of her speech, is the vision of Shelley or some such English poet in Indian disguise.

Of course the simple way of life of old Bengal had changed long before Rabindranath was born, which is why he did not understand, while reviewing *Meghnadbadh Kabya*, why in his description of Ravana's assembly Michael had echoed his predecessors or had indulged in far-fetched fantasies. However, in spite of this, he himself attained the old simplicity of the common man's Bengali nearly towards the end of his life, at a time when expression gets rid of its slavery to experience and seeks opportunities to indulge in licence; and although in this respect the success of *Chhelebela*[3] is extraordinary, yet a comparison with *Jibansmriti*[4] reveals that the first book is lucid on

[1] The reference is to Michael Madhusudan Datta's *Birangana Kabya*, a series of verse-epistles addressed by women to men, written on the model of Ovid's Heroides; Tara is the speaker in the second epistle.

[2] The heroine of Tagore's poem *Biday-Abhishap*.

[3] 'Childhood'.

[4] 'Reminiscences'.

account of the absence of subject-matter. That is to say, it is Rabindranath's pure prose that is held to be easy in universal opinion; and although in modern judgment his substantial essays are the height of perspicuity, they did appear to be terribly difficult to his contemporaries. Hence it may not be unfair to suspect that, precisely because his powers of articulation have been roused by Rabindranath, the modern Bengali does not know that it is not Rabindranath's nature to undo the knots of complicated thought, that he is rather an expert in cutting knots; and analysis reveals that his comparative style is pleasant to read and yet obscure because it does not favour a continuous process of thinking. As an example one may mention *Bishwaparichay*;[5] and however clear the language may be in that scientific essay written for half-educated people, the lack of arguments in it has made the similes swerve from their proper function and has thus done infinite harm to the meaning.

The elaboration of arguments is really against the nature of Bengali; and the etymological situation too makes it so difficult for the Bengali to concatenate several ideas that a sentence with many ramifications is rare in his writings. In spite of this the Bengali language is against the common people; and not only are we beholden to Sanskrit for our abstract words, many a gross matter of modern life too is beyond the expressive powers of Bengali. As a result conversation and discussion among educated Bengalis can hardly proceed without the sprinkling of English, and as hybridism is a hindrance to pleasurable expression, they often write simple things in an indirect way. It was Rabindranath too who discovered this oblique mode of expression; and as he employed this mode even in the dramatic writings of his maturity, they seem somewhat unreal. Of course every play of Rabindranath is either historical or allegorical, and most of the men and women in his novels and stories are not clusters of foam in the whirlpool of events, but are steady symbols of aristocratic ideals. But in my opinion their customs, manners, hopes and desires are not really so incredible: it is their conversation that is unique; and I doubt if anybody has

[5] 'An Introduction to the Nature of the Universe'.

ever heard on the lips of Rabindranath himself the language that his characters speak. He, in other words, never admitted that literature was the faithful reflection of life; and although he knew that the only way of surviving was the daily atonement of sins, yet the ugly was unnecessary in his *Weltanschauung*: just as the existence of the ugly is dependent on the absence of the beautiful, so does the absence of the ugly cause the beautiful to appear.

Whatever modern physicists may think, at least the psychical world is governed by the laws of cause and effect; and as Rabindranath was a worshipper of superhuman freedom of will, the appeal of the popular idiom reached him via Mr Pramatha Chaudhury. For in Mr Chaudhury's writings the occasional is more important than the eternal; and so he is relatively bolder in gleaning from English according to his needs. In spite of this his genius is guided by his tastes and is even the product of tradition. That is to say, when slanderers, noticing the good use made of acquired learning in Birbali writing, preach that that mode of writing is foreign, they forget that even Bharatchandra Ray had made the traditional language conform to the current culture with the help of foreign phrases; and though Mr Chaudhury does now and then take the help of foreign idioms, mainly to ease his labour, he is generally indifferent to topics the discussion of which is precluded by the syntactic mode of Bengali. His lucidity is therefore based on the analytical method; and he avoids multilateral thinking as far as possible because the Bengali's ear is unaccustomed to polyphony. Hence his utterances are always as sharp as the razor's edge, but not everywhere firmly integrated; and in the thinking of men inspired by him, such as Mr Dhurjatiprasad Mukhopadhyay, the lack of integration is even more conspicuous, although they are not at all afraid of the difficult.

On the other hand, Dhurjatiprasad is nearly unique in the field of sheer description; and not only are dialogues astonishingly natural in his stories and novels, but also the difficulties of understanding his very serious essays are to a large extent eliminated if they are heard instead of being read. In

other words, his discussions are as effortless as conversation; and he does not try to establish his own point of view by capturing and paralysing his opponent's intellect in a net of invincible arguments; he is content to set in motion, by means of hints and suggestions, the necessary associations in the mind of the sympathetic listener. The difficulty is that he has few equals in knowledge and erudition and has naturally few followers in the short cut that he takes from the evidence to the conclusion. In spite of this, the works of Dhurjatiprasad prove that the world outside Bengal is not beyond the scope of the Bengali language; the gateway to that vast world has been opened to all Bengalis, high and low alike, by Mr Annadashankar Ray. Moreover, Annadashankar has shown that there is a world of difference between simplicity and levity; and though set down in the spoken idiom, what he has to say is generally uninterrupted and directed to all. He is of course not a theoretical querist; and as every man is limited, he too is devoid of curiosity in many matters. But his works are specially rich in emotions; and his style is not transparent just because spoken Bengali happens to be perspicuous: his pellucid manner of expression is the repository of clear, unambiguous feeling.

Lucidity, that is to say, springs from the purity of realization; and since self-realization too ends with the establishment of the identity between the I and the He, the individuality of the writer must be expressed in an objective style. Moreover, the disintegration of Indian society has recently reached its climax; and the economic condition of the masses is so miserable that we have not had a class war to this day. Even among the middle classes there is no tradition of hereditary prosperity; and where there is no prosperity there is no incentive to improve things. Hence in this age even literature that is meant to be cordially appreciated by the sympathetic connoisseur is not subjective; and the more uncommon a person's intellectual excellence, the more must he be impersonal, for otherwise his hopes of self-expression are in vain. On the other hand, the only way to get rid of vanity is to obey unquestioningly the injunctions of information received; and as information is absolute,

it cannot logically be advertised. Fortunately, all those who follow this method are rationalists with heart and soul; and therefore, keeping the inner significance of their personal experiences secret, they bring to the notice of observers tokens to recognize by. This does not eliminate the differences between the two, but perhaps increases a little the similarity between intention and effort; and the fact that this belief of objective artists is not baseless is evidenced by the continually growing circle of readers of Mr Buddhadeva Bose's works. For his intellect too is uncommon; not satisfied with innate genius, he has learnt many an art in order to extend the horizons of his consciousness. Yet his writings are not leaflets proclaiming his self-love, but constitute a detailed map of the social stratum that sustains the educated Bengali; and since the rise of Buddhadeva is fast-rooted in that soil, in knowing it, it is him that we come to know.

There have been few writers in this country as fluent as Buddhadeva Bose; and to the superficial observer his continual development is not discerned behind the undisturbed ease of his style. His present attachment to objectivity is really the fruit of conscious endeavour, and in the beginning of his career as an author he too had been a seeker of solitude. For his insight, keen from childhood, had made him realize even in his adolescence that for one aspiring to poetic fame in the post-Tagore period it would not be healthy to remain within the track of the sun; and as he knew even then that distinctiveness of style and variety of subject-matter were dependent on each other, he had tried to do away with Rabindranath's influence with the help of novel themes. But however unprecedented a theme may be, it has no place in literature if it involves a denial of what is true; and today Buddhadeva Bose is lucidity incarnate precisely because he whole-heartedly admits this. Truth, that is to say, is not belligerent: if Truth is acknowledged, the unfastening of the knots of consciousness is more or less inevitable; and how one may achieve a faithful expression of experience irrespective of thematic seriousness, without self-advertisement and without succumbing to the temptation of preaching good advice or

establishing his own convictions, may be seen in Buddhadeva's stories and essays. Of course his success is undisputed in other kinds of writing too; and not only is he a first-rate poet, but many are also full of praise for his novels, essays and travelogues. Yet in my opinion pure feeling is his greatest treasure and the lyric and the short story are the best vehicles of that genius.

This does not mean that Buddhadeva Bose is incapable of analysing characters or that he is unaccustomed to artistic discipline. In fact it is the opposite which is true; and he can easily build up a background of psychological events. However, his curiosity about the mysteries of the human heart is relatively less, which is why he rarely loses his way in the final expanse of a novel. His view, in other words, is very broad: it is because he sees things from a distance that he sees the whole situation at once; and he comes to know man with the help of his enlightened intellect: he does not have to remove curtain after curtain in order to get at the inmost soul of a person. His writing is therefore free from the sense of exhaustion; his compassion is not thwarted by contempt bred of familiarity; and so deep is his intimacy with the sensuous earth, that he does not have to rely on his will-power or sense of duty to force himself out of any intense preoccupation: his mind changes with the slightest change in his environment. As a result, the unnatural irritates him; and though many problems of modern times are present in his works, the diseases and perversions of modern society are deprived of his sympathy. Moreover, in his simple judgment, just as Westernized Bengalis are ludicrous, in the same way the Bengalis who dally with the concept of progress are out of their wits. He does understand the necessity for social reform, but since he knows that not the preparation for a revolution but the realization of it is the poet's nature, he relegates to preachers the task of scintillating oratory and devotes himself to the contemplation of reality.

From this point of view he belongs to the same category as Rabindranath; and in spite of his adolescent revolt against aristocratic puritanism, he has been a believer in art for art's sake all his life. In other words, it is precisely because depen-

dency on morality spoils the nature of art, that he did not admit differences between good and evil in literary judgment; and this neutrality of attitude once earned him notoriety, just as *Chokher Bali*[6] and *Chitrangada*[7] were in their days unanimously regarded as obscene by the guardians of taste. History, however, is such a humorist that in Rabindranath's later life it did not hurt his conscience to use abusive words about profligate poets; and of those of his songs that at the time of their composition rang as declarations of erotic desire in the ears of men who had subdued their passions, most are now classified as religious songs. But it is doubtful whether even in his mature years the equation of the sense of good and the sense of beauty would have been within his powers, had not there been a fading of attachment to material objects through gradual development; and though Buddhadeva Bose is even now not prepared to accept popular usage, yet he has recently left behind the independence of the person and reached the independence of the object. These days it is this devotion to Nature that keeps his mind unsullied; and that is why in spite of the absence of pure consciousness, his writings are as full of joy as the works of Rabindranath. In fact, however different they may be in their geniuses, their natures are of the same kind: and I do not agree with those who would relegate this similarity of kind to the category of imitation. For if Rabindranath could have preserved his own peculiar traits in spite of having belonged to the family of Western romantic poets, a similar power should be attributed to Buddhadeva too; and as Buddhadeva does indeed belong to the romantic school, he has been influenced not only by Rabindranath but also by several other precursors in the line.

The precise meaning of the word 'romantic' is still uncertain; in the language of those who have a smattering in more than one subject the epithet is to be applied to a person who indulges in day-dreaming while starving or disturbs the rhythm of a traditional melody by sudden whimsicality. But he who has

[6] 'The Eyesore', a novel by Tagore.
[7] A dramatic poem by Tagore named after the heroine.

insight knows that the writer who breaks conventions is not rare even in a classical age; and not only does the name of Euripides deserve mention in this connection, there is also the clear indication of a discordant note in the attitude of Sophocles, the father of the classical style. However that may be, it was the romantics who brought back to the ruminating Europe of the middle ages the direct inspiration of Greece; and though the antiquarians who came after stood against them and called themselves classical, yet there was no dissemination of Greek culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but there was a repetition of the Roman civilization. Humanism is revived again in the nineteenth century; and as this age begins with translations of Plato or Aeschylus, so it ends with realistic literature. Hence Buddhadeva Bose too is at the same time romantic and objective; and Wordsworth being the leader of his group, lucidity is his hall-mark. Of course, even in this country, this heritage is not his alone; and there are many among his countrymen who equal him in achievement and promise. Yet it is he whom I have used as a pattern in trying to reach a definition of perspicuity, because he is my very opposite and is therefore lawfully rich in the treasure in which I am profoundly lacking.

It is needless to say that a comparative study of Bengali writers is not the aim of this essay; and while I have indeed, because of historical reasons, called up the names of a few more authors in addition to Buddhadeva Bose, they are all of great renown and some are even especially memorable. Hence Buddhadeva's company will not lower their rank, while their company will increase his prestige. Further, this juxtaposition was not necessary, but accidental; and though my self-interrogation may rely on the answers which they give, they are neither rivals nor collaborators but have independently fulfilled and established themselves. They are, in other words, beyond my praise or blame; and Buddhadeva being one of them, his achievement must be judged in his terms alone. At least I know that his God-given powers are wonderful; and he who seeks to find his features in my writings is bound to be dis-

appointed. For my mind is introspective and my vision blurred; and though I wish to, I may not penetrate the military array of the external world. This is perhaps why I am so attracted by Buddhadeva Bose's objective genius; and while I am disturbed by his faults, which are more than one, e.g. excessive emotionalism, indifference to the dissolution of the prose-verse opposition, or literal translations of English syntactic modes, I am filled with wonder when I look at his thoughts and expressions, which run unimpeded, effortless and parallel to each other.

In truth it is the identity of his ideal and his profession that protects his best works from the oblique glance of the fault-finder; nor does that synthesis end there, but like that profound meditation where the meditator and the meditated are one, it denies the deductions of the doctrine of Maya and ultimately reconciles the individual with the universe, the material with the conscious object, the earth with heaven. Of course this great mystical union does not care for reasonings, which is why the destructive intellect has always been bitterly opposed to it. But as soon as I set myself to think, I see that it is not inconsistent with realism; and though the converse of the ontological argument for the existence of God may or may not settle the question of Buddhadeva Bose's literary permanence, yet I think that no one except a universal slanderer may deny that the following poem is at once successful in self-realization and radiant with absolute joy:

My days are dust-pale with the blows of work,
My nights incandescent with waking dreams.
Awake from the friction of metals, O beautiful, white fire-flame,
May the mass of matter become the wind, the moon become woman,
The flower of the earth become the star of the sky.
Rise, O pure lotus, rise at the heart's stem,
Liberate the everlasting in the unfading forgiveness of the moment,
Make the momentary everlasting.
May the body become the mind, the mind become the heart,
    death unite with the heart,
Death become body, heart, mind.

1946

Tagore as a Lyric Poet

Though major poets have seldom been as plentiful as autumn leaves in Vallombrosa, they are to this very day more numerous than we pretend; and could we but feel less patronizing to our contemporaries, we would no longer equate greatness with antiquity. Yet exceptions continue to prove all rules; and whether we agree or not with Jamini Roy, the foremost painter of Bengal, that his homeland belies what holds good for the rest of the world, we must admit that the few acres of green grass, which seem to him so abnormal, come under the operation of general principles only because they gave birth to Rabindranath Tagore. For Tagore remains the one Bengali writer comparable to the past masters; and since it was almost through his lone efforts that our literature, nearly a thousand years old when he began, divested itself of endemic modes and rustic preoccupations to become a part of the republic of letters subject to universal canons of taste and technique, Tagore's juniors might reasonably maintain that, whereas even after death he outshines the planetary moderns like his namesake the sun, some of them now reign supreme in their particular orbits by virtue of the laws inherent in his system and its development. This does not mean that they equal him in magnitude; at his momentary best he far surpasses all other Bengali authors, however solid their special achievement; and judged by the totality of his creative output, he should head the list in most foreign countries.

During my youth Tagore, already a Nobel laureate and at the zenith of his international standing, was not the unique arbiter of Bengali life that he became some ten or fifteen years later when even a new cinema house or departmental store would not open without his physical presence; and while he continued to draw his very opponents into the sphere of an influence so pervasive that his ultimate apotheosis looked like

the necessary culmination of a natural process, my generation, much to our elders' annoyance, used to argue that he made Shakespeare himself dwindle into insignificance. For the irritating strength of our callow bardolatry lay in the fact that the majority of his detractors unconsciously imitated him both in matter and manner, or where they went back to older modes, they did so because they possessed no talent at all; and their failure as critics issued from a pitiable reliance on Tagore's personal standards designed to bring out, if not his own excellence, at least his particular preference in the literature of the East and the West. Thus his accusers could produce no real precedents for getting him condemned; their praise of tradition lacked conviction; they appreciated alien authors only academically; and since they believed with Tagore that genius implies spontaneity and profusion rather than the long patience of Pascal, we rendered them speechless by inquiring who except him wrote at the same time poetry, plays, novels, short stories, literary, political and philosophical essays, letters, sermons, and educational tracts.

Our immature admiration for the range of Tagore's genius may still be valid; he tried his hand in every conceivable department of letters, attaining in each an astounding degree of success; and when in my ignorance I look back on the last two hundred years of European literature, only one name suggests, at a first approximation, qualities similar to his. Goethe possessed a mind as universal as Tagore's, or more so; and I remember that during my initial reading of Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar* Goethe's soliloquy reminded me all the time of the father of modern Bengali literature rather than of his German counterpart, although I knew how fundamentally the two differed in their personal histories and private ethics. Fortunately other resemblances also exist between them; and these need no subjective elaboration. For both believed in the possibility of a world literature, grew progressively disenchanted with nationalist aspirations, accepted the present, despite its manifest horrors, and perhaps for that very reason, discovered romantic perfection in the remote past, which in Goethe's case

was a Greece of Ossianic myths, and in Tagore's an India of legendary hermitages; and while the former, after much searching of heart, repressed his preliminary preference for French, the latter did not let fifty years of imperium in his native tongue prevent him from beginning to write English. Neither, moreover, could resist the eternal-feminine's uplifting attraction throughout their lives; and if Goethe's physical appetite belied his Platonic metaphysics, Tagore's God often assumed a womanly shape.

Their attitudes to Nature were, to start with, even more alike: the Great Mother, she mediated between them and the divine, charmed away the frustrations of civilization, inspired their finest verses by her imperishable beauty; and just as she rejuvenated them in moments of exhaustion, so also her rages struck terror into their hearts when they lacked reverence, or tended to take undue liberties. Goethe, of course, belonged too much to the eighteenth century to give unreason a place in his public life; and though this seems untrue if we confine ourselves to the period of his storm and stress, Ortega of Gasset showed in a striking essay written for the bicentenary of the poet's birth that his Olympian calm cost him lifelong unhappiness resulting, to use psychoanalytical jargon, from repression, or incomplete sublimation. But Tagore, who always adhered to Victorian decorum, did not share Goethe's contingent respect for the aesthetic doctrine of imitation; and taking to surrealist painting in his old age, he found at least partial release from unconscious inhibitions. He had, besides, explored other routes of escape earlier: he sang extremely well; he set to music over two thousand songs of his composition, departing farther and farther from classical modes, and coming ever closer to the fluidity of folk measures; he acted in his own plays, casting himself for parts often his diametrical opposite; he established an educational institution to try out personally his pedagogical principles, subordinating organization to freedom; and still his Faustian discontent remained unresolved.

No man can overcome all challengers in so many fields; and

though Tagore possessed little humility, he knew that only his poetry would count in the end. Apparently he also understood that his genius was unsuited to the epic, which in its Western connotation had been brought to Bengal by his great predecessor Michael Madhusudan Datta, an apostate, as his first name shows, and a returned prodigal in that, almost overnight, he gave up his half-realized ambition to number among the notable writers of English verse, and became instead the best Bengali author of his day; and from the very first, Tagore avoided the preserve of the elder poet, except once, many years later, when his interminable improvizations on a theme, handled by the earlier master with magnificent economy and an unerring instinct for psychological truth, proved the wisdom of the younger man's initial resolution. I refer to the piece translated, I believe, under the title of *Curse at Farewell*; and I mention it less because I consider its persistent popularity undeserved than because its two protagonists talk a heightened version of my language, whereas the workings of their minds do not bear the least trace of my race, or of any other localized group. In fact, both represent Tagore pondering on the indefinite problems of romantic love; and if indifference to things outside himself and maltreatment of unsympathetic characters made him, comparatively speaking, a poor dramatist, the same tendency determined too the creative evolution of his native lyricism.

The story goes that, seeing how rapidly Tagore's reputation was declining in the West, Yeats sent him word that, over and above meticulous revision, he must cut the weaker items altogether out of his collected works; and if the messenger be believed, the advice angered Tagore as much as had Bridges' alterations to one of the *Gitanjali* poems which, when included in the Poet Laureate's famous anthology, *The Spirit of Man*, made the blemishes of the original obvious. Whether apocryphal or not, the anecdote stresses Tagore's indiscriminate haste in publishing what cost him no real effort to write; and though his uncritical self-confidence reflects the absence of public taste and of possible competition rather than any

personal deficiency, he felt compelled, even so, to exclude his juvenilia from the definitive edition of his corpus. The pieces allowed entry in the early volumes lack quality all the same; and the veriest poetaster would think twice today before taking similar stuff to a printer. But the present improvement results directly from his past endeavour; he did not just destroy an effete tradition, but bequeathed to us a new touchstone better able to test the alloys of our times; and our growing nostalgia for the purity of older poetry tends to forget that it looks elemental only in Michael Madhusudan Datta's work, because his imagination refused to stagnate in the aboriginal back-waters where the mightiest of gods acts like an amorous glutton, while mere men forever appease the presiding deity of snakes.

More British than the British, Datta never conversed, or corresponded in his mother tongue, always wore Western clothes, and even insisted on his intimate friends appearing in trousers when they visited him and his European wife, whereas Tagore loathed sedulous apes, would not accept a simple invitation to tea unless he could reply in his own language, and showed himself strangely blind to many an English author; and yet the former was the last of our native poets, while in the hands of the latter Bengali literature turned occidental in all but speech. The paradox ceases, however, to perplex if we assume that the wayward spirit of Datta needed an archetypal discipline to produce enduring poetry, and Tagore, the youngest son of the most distinguished family in Calcutta, required deliverance from private conventions set up by three generations of astonishingly successful elders. Even so, they occupied an invidious position in Hindu society: their wealth, the orthodox insisted, derived from some unholy compromise with Islam; and though the resultant ostracism had been moderated considerably by the time of Tagore's birth, interdining with them still caused real trouble, cordiality towards them spelled eccentricity, and exogamy for them cost a fortune. Naturally therefore the sensitive child proved a recalcitrant boy to become a rebellious youth; and as his gifted and prosperous guardians felt nothing except contempt for the clerkly education forced on ambitious

Bengalis since Macaulay, he began life without the modicum of respect for tradition that normal schooling imposes on average adults.

Then too he was ever lonely: very much older in age, his famous brothers had their proper talents to tend; and the compulsory company of his female relations induced an inferiority complex, from which he could not escape except by taking refuge in the manorial gardens of his retiring father to watch the play of sunlight on the shadowy pond. That in course of time he and the wife of his brother Jyotirindranath fell desperately in love with each other did not mend matters at all; and when the family married him off presumably to prevent scandal, bad got worse and worse until his sister-in-law killed herself. But long before the very possibility of such a tragedy entered his life, he had turned introspective; and his growing pains, aggravated through absence of social contact, uneventfulness of a sheltered existence, and inability to win the approbation of his seniors, led him to exaggerate subjective values. Hence the egocentric ring of his youthful works; almost from the moment he started to write he felt so hostile to the outside world that he would not use the elevated phraseology of his predecessors and contemporaries; and because expression and experience are necessarily inseparable even in his imitative teens, while he waited for his personal vision to develop its own utterance, he showed a strange affinity with the Maithili poet Vidyapati who some four hundred years earlier had also discarded ancestral norms in order to invent an idiom commensurate with his particular reactions.

Vidyapati belonged, moreover, to the Vaishnavite sect which attached supreme importance to the individual, believed in a personal God, and recognized no other way to salvation except through self-surrendering love; and the tenets of this school, especially its theory that evil is but divine play to test the votary's faith, induced in all likelihood the stark simplicity of *Gitanjali* where, in voicing the humility of remorse caused by the natural death of his own wife, Tagore, now middle-aged,

came ultimately to terms with the unspeakable tragedy of his youth. The ambiguity of his Eros may also lead us back to the same source rather than to the romantic indeterminacy of Shelley, although the latter's influence shows occasionally even in the first crop of his polymorphic maturity; and meanwhile he did not let the genuine success of his one and only pastiche keep him from understanding that a lyric poet should prefer idiosyncrasy to eclecticism. For already in his early twenties Tagore had published several volumes of verse, technically uninteresting on the whole, and yet almost always singularly original in content; and if now and again he could not avoid prescriptive subjects, he retained his specific approach right to the end of his long life, so much so that his particular accent sounded the least indistinct when every Bengali writer copied him whether by accident or design, and from time to time a few denigrated him out of discontent, because, as aspects of personality, rhythm and form defy imitation.

Tagore's obsessive concern with the contents of his mind did not, of course, produce uniformly good results: justified, no doubt, by second-hand accounts of current happenings in the West, an excess of self-reliance made his early style weak and his metres now too soft and again too rude; and if, nevertheless, the newcomer continued to receive lavish praise, it was because the discerning, whatever their ultimate allegiance, had tired of the regulation stateliness of every Bengali writer, irrespective of innate merit. But Tagore's admirers wronged Ishwarchandra Gupta by dismissing his impeccable verse as the disguise of a mere sensualist without any trace of taste or spark of spirituality; and even they admitted perforce that, apart from exemplifying moral and intellectual integrity of the highest order, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar demonstrated also that our prose, initially a creation of English missionaries for propagation of the Bible, could deal fully with varieties of religious and secular experience. For all that, both authors offer little except abstract and cerebral satisfaction; impersonally classical, their virtues intimidate today; and while, this notwithstanding, we may not class their works among the curiosities of literature,

we must acknowledge that the dignity of diction and the objectivity of description, which they display at their best, belong to a lost world—a society so remote that we feel less out of place in the highways of Sanskrit poetry and the by-ways of Vaishnava songs than in the company of such mid-nineteenth-century representatives of our living culture.

In other words, the main currents of Bengali literature had persistently upheld collective wisdom to the detriment of direct knowledge until Bankimchandra Chatterjee reversed the order of precedence; a Hindu by birth and conviction, he not only adapted his intellectual life to the positive philosophy of Comte, but became also the first of our writers to illustrate the triumph of personality over character, ascribing to both terms their Hegelian significance; and his was appropriately enough the earliest homage that Tagore, as the rising star of inner light, received from the establishment. The gesture provided, however, one more instance of Chatterjee's prophetic perspicacity, without rendering his junior generally acceptable; Tagore's disrespect for immemorial usage continued to shock a host of responsible critics who, rightly indignant at his employing a private idiom to address the public, accused him of frivolity at his worst and obscurity at his best; and in fairness to them we should concede that, accustomed to the external approach of ancient authors, they found the new-fangled preoccupation with one's obstreperous heart an objectionable and bewildering sight. Yet must we deplore their blind reliance upon rhetorical proprieties, consisting of set similes and hackneyed figures of speech, reproducing antiquated situations and unmixed emotions, describing women typologically, and reducing nature to a cycle of seasons, each abounding in distinctive fruits and flowers, feasts and pursuits; and not even the succeeding generations quite understood that Tagore seemed unintelligible, less because of what he said than because of how he said his piece.

For Tagore could never be considered an introverted aesthete bent on discovering psychological subtleties where none existed: he was subjective without possessing compulsive passions; and his pre-eminence among Indian writers demonstrates once

again the truth of the Freudian view that, whatever a man's intellectual or executive ability, to deserve the title of great he must also personify an ethos. Such approximation in Tagore's case proceeded from his unspecialized feelings, so unspecialized that not only his countrymen but even foreigners pretended to follow him until cataclysm overwhelmed his epoch; and since his experience became at least for a time universally communicable, the langugage, in which it expressed itself originally, needed drastic modifications too. More precisely, Tagore's demands denuded Bengali of regional associations; and while this entailed at first the sacrifice of accuracy, the corresponding gain in sensuous definition soon outweighed the initial loss. He broke up at the same time the monotonous rhythm of our prose and verse; and in two or three decades his voice grew flexible enough to remain attuned to the expanding universe. Hence long before his death we made his speech our own; and today the difficulty of thinking except in his words retards the progress of our literature, encourages esoteric writing and inhibits the equation of utterance and disposition. Tagore did, indeed, know his race: he understood that, deprived of precedents, the Hindu mind languished, and accordingly he liberated and enslaved us simultaneously, opened new horizons, and yet forbore from encouraging us to use our eyes.

At all events, even after Tagore had been at him for perhaps fifty years, the Bengali showed such disinclination to accept responsibility for any serious judgment that when Pramatha Chaudhuri, a nephew of Tagore's by marriage and a minor, though significant, writer, published a volume of clever sonnets, the subsequent argument grew furious not about their poetical merit, but about the degree of their departure from the French form defined quite arbitrarily; and if by then Tagore stood more or less clear of outside influences, he was already caught in his own toils. This, however, escaped notice owing to the constant innovation of his statements concerning his inveterate sentiments; and, unused to orienting themselves without landmarks, his adversaries emphasized the patent debt of his great

ode entitled *Year's End* to Shelley's *West Wind*, while his partisans justified the wistful air of his writing in general on the score that our sweetest songs must tell of saddest thoughts. Some likewise believe that a number of his short stories bear the imprint of Turgenev; and certainly in *Kshanika*, that strangest of interludes in the polyphony of Tagore's works, I for one can overhear Heine's bantering voice purged somehow of its bitter overtones. Yet, as I suggested earlier, he responded too poorly to European authors to appreciate any properly; and whereas the best poems of *Balaka* keep their excellence in spite of misinterpreting Bergson's philosophy of flux, his later plays move us insufficiently, because he wrongly supposed that Maeterlinck created mystery through incoherence.

Tagore loved to adorn even his English lectures with quotations from the original *Upanishads;* but that, I suspect, testified as much to his acceptance of the Black Man's Burden as to his wonderful ear for verse of every kind; and since, apart from occasional mistakes in construing his favourite passages, he habitually distorted their meaning to serve his purpose, he missed in all likelihood the full import of his own inheritance. At any rate, the preclassical source of pure joy, which enables classical Sanskrit literature to effect catharsis without admitting tragic self-pity, remained outside Tagore's reach, although he never tired of calling it the beginning and end of creative activity whether divine or human; and this shortcoming explains why his sincerest lyrics continued to turn into laments even after his unique genius had granted him a whole series of breath-taking revelations. Such confrontations of ego and essence might, of course, bring about the kind of cognitive communion glorified in the Vedas; and so, conceivably, by discovering his individuality, he became in his early thirties identified with the best of Hinduism. But neither during his first maturity, nor some fifteen years later when he wrote the affirmative poems of the *Gitanjali* period, in conscious emulation of our medieval mystics, did he show genuine 'atonement'; and if, nevertheless, I hesitate to underline his intrinsic loneliness, the reason is that more than once I saw him sitting on the

verandah of his Santiniketan house lost in contemplation of the dawning day.

Gorki described in his *Reminiscences* how one day he called on Tolstoy by appointment, and finding the Master absent, traced him to the seashore where the old man, from among a cluster of weathered rocks, gazed at the elemental scene; and, instead of advancing, Gorki beat a precipitous retreat, because the vision and the visionary seemed so integrated that intrusion would have amounted to sacrilege. I sensed in Tagore the same participation: he was not an outsider battening on nature, but belonged to it organically; and on account of this, I class him with the ancients whose 'feeling naturally' Schiller contrasted with our 'feeling for what is natural'. In other words, Tagore's nature poetry, like the Vedic hymns, apostrophizes the eternal forces of the physical world as visible gods protecting the unity of universal life; and so, often though he indulges in personification without attributing to his figures viable qualities in the manner, for instance, of Kalidasa evoking the *Cloud Messenger*, he never fails to communicate his certitude, compelling even sceptics to suspend their disbelief willingly. Moreover, Japanese in their want of details, his landscapes can always be located in Bengal; and if he seems unaware of environmental differences when speaking of people, his seasonal songs are Indian in their generic character, and Bengali in their specific appeal. Thus Tagore's separation from others ceases the moment he gives nature his undivided attention; and then immanence makes all men resemble him, while he himself appears to resemble Hoelderlin rather than Wordsworth.

Fated to spend over half of his eighty-one years in this century, perhaps the most destructive in history, Tagore knew at first hand what man does to man; and if, for all that, he managed to keep intact both sanity and faith in human progress, it was less because he occupied an assured position in a comparatively stable society than because, turning his back on the light that never shines on sea or land, he based his abiding beliefs on 'argument from design'. His optimism reflected also that period of British rule, when, however backward materially,

India looked ready for prodigies of spiritual advance, when Hindus had disowned Suttee and Thuggee, when moral improvement depended on the autonomous will, and political freedom, though slow in coming, followed from the logic of ubiquitous liberalism; and pending final liberation, he wanted the fragmented individual to say like Hoelderlin, 'O Sun, O breezes, only with you, as among brothers, my heart lives yet.' Santiniketan, meant to promote such a chorus, failed, of course, to become an abode of peace, and at times his confidence in nature's beneficent governance faced trial by beastliness of the sort witnessed at Jalianwala Bagh, during the Civil Disobedience of the 'thirties, and on the occasion of the Russian rape of Finland shortly before he died. But even the agony of his last illness could not persuade him that the world stood at the end of its tether; and surely nothing except absolute sincerity would wear so well.

The positive part of Mr Eliot's notorious attack on Goethe suggests that the great German failed as a poet because he dispersed his creative energy in too many directions; and though no Bengali would think of Tagore in similar terms, some might argue that his imagination was at its best when he lived for poetry alone. At any rate, his inventive genius gave no better account of itself than in *Manasi*, published some seventy years ago; and there, apart from coming to grips with his fundamental experiences, refined later, and yet never altered, he displayed practically the whole stock of his verse-forms, thus laying bare the anatomy of our prosody. For, despite their antiquity, Bengali metres had escaped analysis until Tagore took them in hand; scansion had become a mechanical affair, concerned with the counting of letters contradistinguished from syllables; and numbers not amenable to this artificial, if simple, operation had been frowned upon, resulting in considerable loss of rhythmic originality. But Tagore, around the age of thirty, made the miraculous discovery that, contrary to earlier opinion, the Bengali language allows quantitative measures which lengthen and shorten units according to a law

of their own, and owe nothing therefore to the principles of Sanskrit enunciation; and whereas even by manipulating the caesura he could not get his blank verse to flow like that of Michael Madhusudan Datta, his unprecedented understanding of syllabic break and of pause at the end of a foot changed the very nature of our poetry.

No poet before Tagore knew how to extract music out of Bengali consonants; and if at times our lyrical needs made us rebel against the tyranny of the fourteen-lettered line called *Payar*, we either resorted to forms borrowed from Sanskrit and thus unreadable by the rules of Bengali pronunciation, or, like Biharilal Chakravarti, reduced the use of closed syllables to a minimum, imparting to our verse a sort of spineless elasticity. *Manasi* ruled such compromises out of existence, restored our measures to ordered autonomy, and broke with the past so sharply that ever since its appearance most of our previous poetry has seemed not only imperfect rhythmically but also metrically defective; and incidentally, it showed further that Michael Madhusudan Datta erred in thinking that *Payar* could overflow into feet of three, five or seven letters, that this freedom is the birthright of quantitative numbers, and that all other kinds dislike the odd. Even Bharatchandra, our best prosodist until Tagore took away his distinction, sounds monotonous to modern ears; and almost everybody else right up to the second decade of the nineteenth century indulged in laxity which passed muster, just because Bengali poems were once written to be sung, or chanted, rather than read. Hence the crucial importance of *Manasi* in the history of our literature; and though the technical skill of its author never ceased to grow, his next basic contribution to the poet's craft occurred when, at seventy, he set about bridging the gulf between verse and prose.

Alas, the ontological argument applies to the Almighty alone; and men continue to exist in despite of their imperfections. Thus even Tagore failed to satisfy all the demands which his proper actions raised; and just as the force of direct experience drove him to create a new instrument of expression,

so also the very possibility of his medium ended by possessing him, to the exclusion of their relevance to affective urges. In any case, the pristine candour of his style, which earned *Gitanjali* such admiration from Gide, did not last long; and turning more and more oblique, his later writings, even when using straight vernacular, drew only reluctantly upon his hoard of original feelings to be served up again and again with amplificatory analogies and rhetorical figures. In other words, his adolescence and prime rather than the fruitful years of his protracted ripeness, gave him his real stature: and though denied Tagore's span of life, no one, however gifted, could hope to equal Tagore's ultimate mastery over rhyme and rhythm: the older he grew, the closer he came to absolute solipsism. Of course, he went on watching external events all the time; and except during the two years of his fatal illness, most novel movements in our literature began under his agile leadership. Yet, surely, if slowly, his mental reactions discarded their objective reference; and while this shift of his interest from matter to manner made his works increasingly 'pure', his facility and variety prevented him becoming, say, another Mallarmé.

In visual imagination, Tagore resembled Victor Hugo; both could create palpable poems almost out of nothing; and even when they argued, neither would submit to the compulsion of reason if telling similes were at hand. But perhaps because Bengali lacks the logical constitution of French, Tagore hardly ever tried to fuse his images into a pictorial composition; and many of his longer pieces suggest therefore proliferation rather than development. His last poems, dictated from sick-bed, are, of course, short; and the resultant gain in intensity has made modern critics overlook their retrogressive theme and technique. His songs, on the other hand, possess the double advantage of brevity and tunefulness; and this combination places them in the forefront of his poetical works. For their appeal, deriving from the magic of his language, does not admit of translation; and whereas his melodies, matching music to the meaning of his words, may still convey a modicum of emotion to some foreigners, only a small fraction of his

general poetry reveals the structural organization demanded by an 'extended metaphor'. Hence the difficulty of showing non-Bengalis where Tagore's greatness lay; his situation, like Pushkin's, must present an enigma to outsiders; and the veriest Bengali should reflect dispassionately before insisting on his inclusion in the first category of the world's poets. For us, however, he remains the supreme man of letters; in forging our current speech, he remodelled our culture too; and when we meet sceptics, let us remember that reality resides in propositions.

1960

Hugo and Others

The other day I shocked a young critic by venturing to suggest that sheer merit entitles Victor Hugo to a place among the immortals; and my friend's reaction so puzzled me that I cannot let the seventy-fifth anniversary of the poet's death pass without rearranging my thoughts on the subject. For if, applied to the birthday of a living writer, the ordinal invites eulogy, in the opposite context it becomes a reminder that, of all human vanities, glory is perhaps the most ephemeral; and Hugo's case calls for special study, because when the great man ended his days only three quarters of a century ago, his prestige equalled Racine's, except that the dramatist's fame illustrated 'classic regularity', whereas the upstart of 'romantic order' considered himself peerless at the tender age of twenty-five. The funeral he received some six decades later proved that the French people accepted him at his own valuation; and though equally large crowds had crammed the streets of Paris to witness the passage of Louis XIV's coffin to Saint Denis, those who gathered to watch the procession of cobblers bring Hugo's remains to the Arc de Triomphe did not indulge in the frenzy of joy exhibited at the demise of the royal patriarch. The cobblers were there, of course, to give substance to the democratic pretensions of the departed; and conceivably, the choice of the particular catafalque indicated the government's belated concession to Hugo's reiterated demand that the name of his father—a Napoleonic general—should appear on the national monument. Nevertheless, the entire country mourned its loss unreservedly; and the resultant void may be likened to Tagore's absence from the Bengali world.

Almost from the outset of his career Tagore, however, was a Triton among the minnows, whereas Hugo wrested admiration from the most creative century in modern history; and though, even after thirty years of his death, Gide, asked to name the

greatest of French poets, had still replied, 'Victor Hugo, alas', the majority of those who read him today may only be students preparing for university examinations. The faults of his character must obviously bear a large part of the blame for this decline in his reputation; and whether or not I wrongly believe that his age elevated hypocrisy to a social virtue, I cannot find another parallel for the woeful inconsistency between his words and deeds. On his own behalf he claimed the romantic artist's privilege of sexual promiscuity which brought him once within an ace of the gaol; and yet, when his all-suffering wife fell in love with Sainte-Beuve, he behaved like a possessive bourgeois in keeping his spouse for fear of losing face, while visiting on her lover his implacable wrath. He consigned his lifelong mistress to the meanest of harems, but never stopped running after housemaids; and at the age of seventy he felt no compunction in seducing the lovely daughter of his dead disciple Gautier. Nor did his public conduct present a more edifying spectacle: a conservative during the Bourbon restoration, he turned liberal because his loyalty went unrewarded; he forgot his progressive professions as soon as Louis Philippe made him a peer of France; and his later republicanism derived exclusively from Louis Napoleon's refusal to appoint him minister in recognition of his assistance at the birth of the Second Empire.

I remain, of course, a stranger to the ethos of the French, with the sound of whose idiom I am even less familiar than with the speech rhythm of English; and since I grew up at a time when the leaders of my generation saw no alternative to holding the previous century responsible for the impending ruin, I resented my elders' advice to read *Hernani* for its heroism and magnanimity, or *Les Misérables* for its pity and optimism. To my rebellious eyes their author resembled my well-meaning preceptors: he too loved pompous platitudes, paid only lip-service to libertarian principles, and at the moment of decision acted with wanton duplicity; and now that nearly sixty years of contact with a decomposing world has leached away my illusion about our disenchantment, I still find that, forced to think, Hugo, like Byron in Matthew Arnold's phrase, becomes a child. Yet

Valéry argues that Hugo's defects originated in his qualities; and I accept the paradox that a great writer's errors rescue him from oblivion by first whetting the critical faculty of detractors and then leading them to his ultimate virtues. For, unconcerned with the truth or falsity of beliefs, the mysterious essence of poetry consists of experience inseparable from expression; what, at any rate, induces the reader to suspend disbelief willingly is the degree of sincerity behind the poet's faith, the assurance that the latter really believes his own words, believes in them not because they sound impressive, conform to current fashion, or vindicate a temporary pose, but because the development of his personality demands their mediation; and this means that his works must end by creating a significant whole.

Such coherence of corpus implies no monotony; and, however suspect his hatred of Louis Napoleon, the six thousand lines of variations on the theme, which Hugo collected under the title of *Les Châtiments*, show his versatile genius at its invective best. Indeed, the range of his matter and manner exceeds all records hitherto established; and if we remember that, treated by him, the stiff alexandrine became as vitally flexible as the English blank verse in the seventeenth century, that his repertory of rhymes is the largest of any ever used in France, that common and recondite terms enjoy equal rights within the amplitude of his vocabulary, we would at least understand his boast that what he did not accomplish was worth nobody's pain. Let us recall too that according to Mistral form alone exists; and one need not belong to the Platonic brotherhood to concede that Hugo, when he chose, could be a purer poet than Mallarmé. Hugo, of course, read even newspapers in search of subjects for his poetical masterpiece *La Légende des Siècles* —an epic composed of separate pieces illustrating his interpretation of human history; and his thesis, apart from its modal innovation, compared well with the lucubrations of, say, Croce, Fisher and Whitehead. Yet he differed from them, and from Pope, the author of *Essay on Man*, in depending only on the magic of a personal rhythm and the affective unity of his organic imagery to make us recognize the authenticity of his

cosmological vision; and since seventy-five years of adverse winds have not eroded a single feature of that monumental achievement, we must conclude with Thomas Mann that art and life seldom coalesce.

In any case, if we choose to judge poets by the standard of total integrity, many of our idols must vacate their present pedestals; and then we would realize that Baudelaire's physical love of vice accords ill with his intellectual horror of sin. His romantic fancy luxuriated, of course, in scenes of childhood; and he abominated the prosperity of industrialized France, because it perpetuated the rape of innocence. But infancy, however holy, did not provide him with intimations of immortality; and if this 'paradise full of furtive pleasures' caused the famous 'new thrill' for which ageing Hugo so generously thanked the young author of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, an alienist of today might consider the book symptomatic of incipient schizophrenia. Since I disapprove of both the clinical and the moral approach to literature, I only ask why a stylist of classic purity should inveigh against 'Latin ashes and Greek dust'; and perhaps the answer lies in the grossness of Baudelaire's appetite for earth, 'the sweet cake', rather than in any mystical interdependence of things. For when the 'ecstatic victim' of his own clairvoyance sees through the 'backcloth of vast existence' to the 'strange worlds' of Desert Fathers and marine prophets, serpents from a Gorgon's head crawl down the nursery bookshelves to bite his dragging slippers; and though the quotations come from *La Voix*, the least arresting of evil flowers, its ascription of the loveliest thoughts to fools belies Baudelaire's dandyism and the sophistication of his taste in the arts. The poem's confusion obviously reflects a divided mind; and yet we cannot offer such a simple explanation of Baudelairean correspondences, unless we disregard as insincere his coupling of nature and damnation.

The last two paragraphs owe much to Mr J. M. Cohen's recent book, *Poetry of this Age*, where he argues further that moderns often resort to a deliberate confusion of sense impressions, because they know no other remedy against the exhaustion of their linguistic heritage; and he cites as example Lorca's

'slippery blood groans its silent snake's song'. Here, when describing the soundless trickle of congealing blood shed by groaning men in the agony of death, the poet confounds the phenomenal order of epithets for fear that the normal procedure might produce a trite effect; and though the line shows considerable compression, the depicted situation, experienced all over the world during the last forty years, appears so familiar to us that we refuse to heed it, unless something more insidious wakens our understanding to its eternal and emergent import simultaneously. Of course, Lorca tries to remember both; and thus the judge, who comes through the olive plantations to inquire into the fatal quarrel, says to his attendants, 'Gentlemen of the civil guard, this is the same old story; four Romans have been killed and five Carthaginians.' But, in spite of the fore-shortening, the perspective wants depth; and if the treatment reminds one of Yeats refining away his unconsummated love-affair until Maude Gonne can be equated with Helen of Troy, the Spaniard falls far short of the intensity and tension that resulted from the Irishman's fidelity to 'the book of the people'. For, unlike Hugo in the size of his vocabulary, Yeats too compelled even ordinary words to his extraordinary will; and the same terms as his juniors consider worn express a personality richer in complexity than theirs.

Yeats called himself one of the last romantics; and perhaps he meant thereby that his philosophy of history did not possess the pristine simplicity of Hugo's apocalyptic vision. But though the latter never made a cosmic principle of conflict, nor thought that creative activity would be impossible without the duality of self and anti-self, he regarded progress as 'the human labyrinth', because the clash of good and evil turned the straight line into a spiral; and at the heart of the mystery he saw the 'monstrous' trumpet of the last judgment ready for 'the immense breath' of some archangel or seraphim standing on hell and crowned with stars. He performs a still greater miracle in forcing his readers to peer into the trombone's void to find that even God has vanished from there; and while communicating his abysmal horror of the timeless and the disembodied, he

keeps his own and our senses functioning normally for the sole reason that he can order worlds into existence. Thanks to this divine gift, a word or a phrase from him suffices to conjure out of nothing concrete images in subtle apposition: and thus when, lamenting the passing of Gautier, he speaks of the wild noise of oaks felled for the pyre of Hercules, we also perceive why the twilight of 'the haughty century' should resound to the joyous neighing of Death's horses which speed giants and pygmies, pagans and Christians to the same dissolution. Moreover, Hugo became the absolute master of his mother tongue in despite of competition from Lamartine, Musset and Vigny among others; and if he disdained kaleidoscopic metaphors, he knew the book of the people better than Yeats.

I can think of no other writer except Tagore whose imagination worked as visually as Hugo's; but probably because the structure of his language lacks the logic of French, the Bengali poet seldom tried to fuse his similes into a pictorial composition, subordinating each part to overall harmony; and consequently his longer poems, unless engaged in story-telling, suggest proliferation rather than development. Of course, Hugo also preferred facile analogy to the compulsion of reason; and this often led to grandiloquent generalizations devoid of substance. Even so he made his moral points unobtrusively; and to compare *Le Cimetière d'Eylau* with *The Charge of the Light Brigade* is to separate poetry from propaganda. For though both pieces exalt the unquestioning heroism of patriots, dying men loom large through the mist and smoke of Hugo's battle-scene, whereas Tennyson's ranting refrain fails to breathe life into his automata; and that may be why, in spite of seeing them on the screen many times during my receptive boyhood, I have retained no impression of their exploit, while Hugo's uncle, one of three survivors, describes his desperate adventure with an eyewitness' feeling for the heterogeneity of actual experience. I do not, however, mean to belittle Tennyson: he was, and still remains, the greatest figure in English letters since Wordsworth; and if the extent of Browning's interests exceeded his, he possessed the richer mind and a deeper, albeit less meretricious,

understanding of prosody. Hugo, his superior in command of words, produced nothing to match *In Memoriam;* and, placed against *Idyls of the King*, the Frenchman's reconstruction of medieval romances proves how unfairly Voltaire attacked the British genius for its endemic tendency towards barbarous hyperbole.

For all that, the Victorian bard leaves me cold; and if I react less unfavourably to his continental counterpart, it is because the twentieth century has broadly confirmed Hugo's gloomy prognostications. Both, however, irritate me by their 'life-enhancing' qualities; and considering that his age provided enough evidence for the Frenchman to conclude that neither revolution, nor evolution made the human condition better, his basic optimism seems as questionable as Tennyson's religious doubts were insincere. Then too the daily claims of total war vitiates our sense of possession, rendering simple enjoyment of the world's goods difficult; and moderns must instinctively revolt against the customary worship of Nature in utter disregard of her hostility, or, in the very least, indifference, to man. Hence my personal preference for the 'decadent' poetry of Baudelaire and his progeny who know 'the whole earth' to be 'their hospital endowed by the ruined millionaire'; and, once admitted there, I submit with a certain pride to the plying steel of the wounded surgeon and the constant care of the dying nurse. But my brave new thrill will also turn stale in future; and for this reason I attach little importance to private likes and dislikes when adjudicating on the relative merits of poets. Time's revenge and vagaries of fashion cannot, on the other hand, invalidate the objective standards of literary criticism; and their only alternative requires acceptance of a writer on his own terms for analysis of his intentions and measurement of the distance between aim and achievement. Any one of these criteria should establish the absolute greatness of Hugo; and he would not disappoint us unless we expect him to pander to particular predilections.

1960

Part Three

A Farewell

Sitting at your feet on the newly-sprouting grass,
I shall never say, thrilling the infant pines,
I shall never say, in the deepening dusk of a mating spring,
'I want not the burnished throne of heaven,
If you, my love,
Give me the forsaken corner in your recessed heart.'

From my nerveless hands, letting the petals of plucked-out crocuses fall on the flowering meadow,
I shall never say, brushing away my imaginary tears in shameless abandon,
I shall never say in the distraught moment of an anguished farewell,
'The very thought of our parting, my love,
Brings me face to face with hell,
Lets loose the final chaos on my soul.'
I shall never say,
'From today, my sky,
Dizzy with its ceaseless periplus of a captive infinity,
Will cherish, in its fond bosom,
Lifeless images of bygone stars.'

In bee-loud glades of a far-off land,
Such motley extravagance
Embroidered in genuine joy and unfeigned sorrow,
And often in crafty levity,
Has, in springs past,
Tinged the ears of forgotten maidens with hectic flush of flaming passion.
And today
I shall not raise the mirage of tearful love in your grey-blue eyes
With the magic touch of such mimic moonshine.

I shall say,
In the searching hour of frank farewell, without craven pretence, I shall rather say,
'My passing love,
Your peerless memory shall not be made everlasting in my heart.
Let the intense inspiration of your presence
Fade away into a tear-laden darkness,
Leaving an inarticulate ecstasy of inscrutable awareness,
Even as the flashing exhilaration of a starless monsoon night.'

Should you wish, forget me, dear,
And if you will,
Give me a moment of passive pity
In your evenings of wistful leisure;
But remember, if you can, remember only this:
My bark, my lone bark,
Floating on the languid stream of befogged monotony,
Was plunging into the depths of ambiguous despair,
When you, my lover,
My exotic lover,
Stretched out your arms in simple charity
And checked its constant career.

Beyond the seven seas,
In a murmuring coconut-grove,
On a subdued morning of nascent spring,
The Eternal One who, in sudden wantonness,
Left the lingering echo of her invisible anklets in my blood;
She who, in nights of sleepless passion,
Has, again and again, caused immeasurable rifts in my locked embraces
By luminous invitations written on the walls of bridal chambers;
She, my disembodied and dumb consoler,
Who has parted the clouds of a thousand storms
To show me the high light of hopes and aspirations through sky-holes;

She, the nameless companion of my million births and million
deaths,
Has, once again, cast her fleeting shadow
On the deep blue pools of your liquid eyes.
And in this guileless twilight of stark farewell,
Standing on the arid confluence of our two lives,
I bow to her,
I bow my pride-heavy head
Before the footprint of the steadfast stranger
Stored in your yielding soul.

Chicago, May 8, 1929

Conflict

Squandering her gorgeous youth in exotic claims,
The declining day, an ancient prima donna,
Returns to this lonely land, the land of her birth,
To hide her crumbling splendour and in private die.

And there is no peace in my mind, nor any hope.
Enclosed in dumb disaster, stolidly I see
The intangible wells of my desert prison
Recede to stark horizons, flex but never bend.
And through the cracks of ageless silence there echoes
Echoes in emptiness the wail of a lost soul.
Beating the unavailing gates with forlorn fists,
An expiring voice cries, cries in vain and is still.

To-day my friend's talk and his deft philosophy
Fail to build a bridge of sympathy between us;

Our discord gapes wider, there yawns cavernous doubt,
And though my ears listen, my mind is far away.

In his wont he says: 'There is no waste in this world;
And the earth's staid fulcrum on necessity rests;
We break to build and break anew; we devastate
In order that the divine plough may furrow through
Our barren fields, and make fertile what was fallow
Before. Thus goodness and badness are intermixed,
And conflict becomes a cosmic law.'

My friend
Stops a while, but seeing me silent, continues;
'Maybe our certain reward is not here and now,
Maybe life weeds its changeful way through hill and dale,
Through wax and wane; maybe rising and falling life
Goes on. Perhaps, at every twist and turn, every
Meeting of night and day, our churned-up memory
Like the primal sea yields up to Gods and titans
Its heritage of mortal poison, so that we,
Drinking it, may become one with the Infinite,
One with static time, and death-surpassing peace.'

'Look,' he says, 'look up, there looms large the promised land;
And the interspace contains but shadowy pain;
Of errors a few, some false turnings, a check or two,
A tinge of despair, perhaps, and you have arrived
At the eternal heights, a shade tired, a trifle
Out of breath, like a climber of haughty towers.
Only one born blind, only one craven from start
Would feel the labour lost, and in timid gropings
About the mounting stairs, think that all is in vain.
In Patience and Faith the secret of Being resides,
Everlasting mercy shines through duress alone.'

He halts not but talks apace and his fulsome words
Striking the quiescent chords of remembrance in me,

Fill the resonant chambers of my empty brain
With contentious echoes. And my distraught eyes
Escaping the bounds of this obstreperous room,
Roam the alien azure of the deepening dusk.
Forsaking the body's inert ballast behind,
My impetuous heart with full sail voyages forth
To a far, foreign shore beyond the seven seas,
Where once under an auspicious sky, unnumbered
Lustres past, a man and maid with high hopes had built
A magic mountain of steadfast faith, and plucking
The mystic rose had spread their future bridal bed
On the pathless crest of this dream-dim world.

O friend,
Deprived of its stellar pride that aspiring wish,
Even as the skeleton moon, distils, today,
But morbid dew; and the passion of that anguished
Parting humbled lies in ubiquitous want.
In vain that fiery trial; of that deep-delving pain
Only the flinty trenches remain to mark out
The bourne of my lonesome ruin. O friend, this selfsame
Chinese blue had also made that peerless twilight
Beautiful; and our Olympus too was arrayed
In as occult a light as veils your enduring
Faith—alas, I know that bewitching, airy hue
Derides our questing gaze, charms reason and enshrouds
The unmeaning vacuity of hope-bereft space.
And so your far-flung dialectic nets, today,
Surge round me in flimsy efforts. And though at times
My weary brain allows itself to fall asleep
Rocked by the rhythmic flow of your sooth-seeming wit,
Yet the scales of deeper values in pondering
That hoary lie, inclines with innate reverence
Towards the deathless void of my desperate dreams,

September 18, 1932

Nocturne

Armoured in burnished brass, bearing aloft his bow,
The rebel summer had come to wage lawless war
On the diehard heaven; and through the long June day
I had sensed his weapon's unheard clamour and watched
Invisible arrows speed to their trembling mark.
In the din of that titanic strife, the city
Crouched in shuddering awe, like some primeval beast
Deprived of its immoderate roar, till the sky
Lay pale and vanquished, heaped on the far horizon,
Its blue blood oozing into a congealing sea;
And the shrivelled sun dropped, hibiscus-wise, to seek
The destructive feet of some oriental god,
Dark and monstrous.
                    Filled with frenzied fear and by turns
Faint, I felt my feeble heart turn into dead weight.
The strange city seemed swallowed up in desert sands,
In midst of which I was a lone, helpless rider
Whose tremulous mount, tuned to disembodied things,
Gallops towards annihilation in blind haste,
Affrighted by voiceless whisperings of sad ghosts.

Of a sudden my headlong course was stayed; for you
With your fateful eyes had chanced on my mortal path.
You spoke, and the bleak ruins replied to your call.
Like a woman rescued from her horrible dreams,
The silent city abruptly woke, a faint smile
Flickering in the depths of her doubt-clouded gaze.
About us the seven winds of heaven gathered,
Like adoring magi with frankincense and myrrh.
The void bristled with the presence of unseen gods,
Piercing the pall of darkness with curious eyes.
And through the dissonance of the fragmented world,
There ran latent chords of symphonic sympathy.

Your fragile lips uttered a few faltering words,
But they were odes of immortality to me.

Today once more the looming phantom shapes return,
Dreaded darkness draws in again its nightmare ring,
Quenching my guiding stars in the descending sky;
And frantically I scan night's increate wastes
For the beacon light of your wild flamboyant hair.
Dazed and blinded by the gathering gale, I sniff
The charged air for the memoried fragrance of your
Lambent presence, mutely praying the mocking gods
For one momentary glimpse of your brooding brow
Scrolled in runic letters of mystic sympathy.

Much ado about nothing, love's fain labours lost.
There is no help nor hope in the desolate world,
Through which I flee pursued by ruthless solitude.
And where'er I turn faith's ancient sanctuaries
Keep crumbling to dust at my own destructive rush,
Until between me and nihilistic reason
No protective patch remains, but only a drear
Glaring plain, wherein the dialectic demon,
Bursting with blasphemous laughter, loudly proclaims
The vanity of our mad midsummer night's dream.

Who knows, perhaps, there was no miracle in fact,
And the sublime myth was by retrospection wrought.
There was nothing divine in our chance encounter;
It was of the earth earthy, not even, alas,
The meeting of a faun and nymph in primal woods,
But beauty's diurnal rape by the prowling beast.
And on that day we did not hear God's angels sing
To the immemorial music of the spheres,
But the predatory roar of concupiscence,
Fastening famished jaws on the first transfixed prey;
And your luscious breasts distilled not ambrosia,
But the carnal rank smell of animals in rut.

So now when you are vanished, and hibernal sleep
Has frozen the toxic tide of lust in my veins,
I perceive, standing in the void of perished dreams,
That the rapturous bliss of that magic moment
Was, indeed, a mere accident of time and space.
The careless grace of a lifted arm, a heat-flushed
Cheek aureoled in rebellious tresses,
The aphrodisiac rustle of slipping clothes—
These and similar transitory things, perhaps,
Were the ingredients of that potent potion
Whose fumes, clearing in this icy air, have left me
Stranded today in this city of dreadful night,
Gibbering before strangers in an uncouth tongue,
Asking in vain for the road to the Promised Land.

Calcutta, February 12, 1933

Camel-Bird

I

You hear me well: and yet you try
To hide within the desert's fold.
Here shadows shrink until they die,
While dead horizons cannot hold
The quick mirage, and, never near,
The cruel sky is mute and blue.
The hunter stalks no phantom deer;
He loses all by losing you.
The sands are heedless. Why run on,
When tell-tale footprints point your way?

Your prehistoric friends are gone,
And, all alone, you stand at bay.

II

By brooding on a broken egg
You cannot hatch or make it whole:
The self-consuming hunger's peg,
You play in void a dual role.
Become, instead, my wilful ark
Upon the chartless sea of sand;
For danger you refuse to mark,
Although you know the lie of land.
Come, let us seek a new retreat,
Enclosed in thorn and scorched all through,
Where trickles water, if not sweet;
The earth attracts a date or two.

III

No wishful creeper shall I grow
To keep your iron cage concealed,
Nor call in hucksters who would know
What price your useless wings should yield.
With moulted feathers I shall make
A fan to suit the anchorite,
But out of fibrils never rake
The dust once raised by steeds in flight.
My apprehensions shall prevail:
Your runic cry will not suborn:
For you are not the Nightingale
Who lulls to feed on mortgaged corn.

IV

This ruin is our heritance:
A line of spendthrifts went before;

They picked the pounds, and left no pence:
Now both of us must pay their score.
And so your self-absorption seems
Inept: can blindness cheat a curse?
The present is no time for dreams:
By shunning me you make bad worse.
Let each of us then seal a bond
To serve the other's interest:
You speed me to the world beyond,
While I propose the human test.

Antinomies

Perhaps no God exists: Creation, born a waif,
Remains unruly still; decreasing order lends
A clue to time's accretions; self-absorption rends
The heavens waxing fast; and chance embraces chafe
The living whose coition pairs disease with death.
Yet instincts keep their courses; Science grows, because
Coy Nature loves her old wiles; contrapuntal flaws
Uphold perfection; earth compels no shibboleth.
And so, when void rejects my prayers, they echo back,
Occult and clippt like prophecy, and Fortune seems
No more outrageous than a looking glass where lack
Is plenty's mirror image, facts are bonded dreams.
Thereafter suffering avails: while I disburse
The wages of her sin, she ransoms Adam's curse.

August 22, 1941

The Fool

To be a tragic hero was my early dream:
I was myself in single combat braving fate;
And since, mortal born, I reaped immortal hate,
The sure catharsis yet would sanctify the theme,
And anarchs, facing frantic odds, would imitate
My fabled life. For high as Christ's my name would rate
In times to come, when all would bless and none blaspheme.
The last act starts, as finally the footlights flare;
The prating puppets, massed, obey the leading string;
Producers mock and squabble off stage: do I dare,
Their comedy of errors having made me King?
However, chance is blind; and, when she drags the pool,
In Love's Revenge I come to play the sleepy fool.

Search

For my real self I search continually.
But what I find, touch in close intimacy,
Is not what I seek.
It is only the talkative personality
Assuming so many forms, so many tongues, so many occupa-
tions,
Which has no point of contact
With the free body and a single intellect;
The restless one
Uneasy on the broad lap of the earth
Whose dream battalions charge
Incessantly the heaven's gate of illusion

Beyond the vacuous boundary of the universe,
Where its representative, the calculating deity,
Loyalty to his liege forgotten, like the distant regent,
Sits silent, absorbed in himself for eternity
Spinning the cobweb of conspiracy.

The object of my search
Has no division, conflict or space-time;
But body, intellect, knowledge and conation
Unite, like diverse bricks that form an arch,
Perfect, undifferentiated, self-completing,
Insensitive to insult or fame's cheating;
Which on the path of renunciation
Alone completes the broken orbit; and with distant light
Gives a bearing to the boat lost in the night.
This dedicated flame adores
The fair madonna,
And ugly whores
Are by its light transformed.
Not age, disease nor death can here bring fear,
Unperturbed to the ultimate extinction goes
The long line of beacons sprung from each phoenix pyre.
Fascinated by that pollen which makes the human banyan, undying,
Daily into its too soon deciduous fruit to flower,
I search for the nameless, eternal substance deep in my being.

October 12, 1933

Cyclone

I

On days of rain I still remember her.
As soon as local green is overcast
With common grey, she comes, an image, sharp
In outline only, lighted symbol-wise
By fitful flares of memory, all eyes
And cheeks, like leading ladies just before
The curtain falls, and instantly, the show
And seer transfusing, I forget my years,
My forty years and more, the dewlap's spread
Across the glass, however much I stretch
To look at it, the swelling paunch which hides
The toes from downward glance, the overlay
Of hair confounded by the slightest breeze,
Allowing brow to take the place of crown.
Insurance, well I know, is life itself;
And yet the monthly premiums deplete
My daily menus, though all doctors say
That tissue-waste is certain at my age,
Unless the diet is inversely rich
In nourishment. And since I am alive,
How can I die until these eyes have seen,
If not all landlords dispossessed, at least
The mortgage on my neighbours' stately home
Foreclosed and Fortune's pampered darlings taught
A modicum of courtesy and sense?

II

Sequestered by the rain, I lose all count
Of such events; and, barely guessed, the lane
Emerging from my squalid lodging seems
A path untrodden yet but waiting for
Forerunners' feet, and at its distant end

A secret world invites discovery.
I do not then remember that beyond
The veiled horizons gleaners fight among
The stubbles, while the fallow fields are sown
With atavistic hate which death shall reap
For centuries to come. There now on thrones
Of banished or beheaded Caesars climb
Contending tyrants, each more absolute
Than he who went before; all passions spent,
The Lonely Watcher of the Skies sustains
No longer nor protects; and pushing out
The Golden Stopper, chthonic darkness drowns
The procreative cities of the ant.
A noose of bombers holds the heavens fast
And chokes the Primal Poet, in whose throat
Afflatus rattles like a moribund's
Expiring breath. Thus values must decay,
And only those with landed property
Refuse to see the universal ebb.
But I am not of them, and, though from dawn
To dusk I spend in anxious thought, the mites
I save occasionally, after back
And belly have received their due, are vain,
Because return from safe investment is
So meagre. Yet I hear it argued that
If Churchill's autocratic will is not
Allowed free play, the Empire cannot last,
And once the Commonwealth to chaos yields,
Farewell to private enterprise whereon,
As all agree, civilization rests.
No wonder then my conscience finds it hard
To single Hitler out for calumny.

III

But when her sacred presence comes to fill
The haunted void, on me descends a peace

That passeth understanding. This abode
Of fat and lymph and bitterness, my brute
And loathsome body, then, abruptly purged
Of time's excrescences and spatial faults,
Reverts to elemental purity.
And insulated in my changeless dreams,
An active hero of high tragedy,
I found Utopia where order reigns
Without the aid of soldiers, planes and guns.
There mercy tempers justice, sympathy
Becomes an attribute of intellect,
And love of life is immanent in all;
No beast of prey infests the woods, to top
The hills is well within the competence
Of man, and in the endless summer days
The fabled river skirts the verdant banks,
Inciting youth to break their bonds and dance,
While, swept by fragrant winds, the lucid sky
Restores to earth in falling dew the hope
Of generations past and consummates
The pact between Briand and Stresemann.

IV

By then already cataclysmal clouds
Had massed perhaps, and, ambushed in their midst,
The Thunder God was sharpening his sword.
At least Il Duce had rehearsed his myths,
Exactly like refrains of savage chiefs
When war impends, and outcast Trotsky, still
In search of sanctuary, might have been
A medieval leper whose approach,
Announced by bell, made doors and windows shut
Along his path, as, almless, he regained
The desolation. Yet the heritage
Of countless sunsets in her glowing hair;
The lunar bloom of ripened grapes upon

Her lissom limbs; and limber lightning of
Disdain revealing suddenly her eyes'
Cerulean profundity; the works
Of Goethe, Hoelderlin and Rilke, with
The tales of Thomas Mann, reposing in
The alcoves; Bach's sonatas nestling on
The clavichord; the lustrous ceiling of
Centennial oak sweeping up to meet
The gables; sheltering the votive lamp
Within her airy veil, the ageless town
On vigil, with her rosary, beside
The carefree bed of Culture lost in dreams—
Against such sights the Nazis, looked at from
My attic, could not but seem pigmy drolls,
However much they heiled in unison
And, waving smoky torches, trooped behind
The Swastika. By contrast memory
The more intently mourned, for its own sake
And worth, the speechless parting in the rain.

V

I erred, of course, in thinking thus. For truth
And falsehood, good and evil, ugliness
And beauty are reciprocally linked,
Because if either fades, its obverse, too,
Must disappear and, while they both exist,
The minus may become the plus, like poles
In alternating fields. Moreover, though
The wise maintain that those who claim to be
Specifically individual
Are outlaws bent on ruining the world,
Yet personal determination can,
When brought to bear upon the pendulum
Of change, accelerate or slow it down.
But, in that case could Lila break her word,
And since the clock has struck already twelve,

Would not the telephone have rung by now?
She is not, all the same, a minx, as is
That piece of pure frivolity she calls
Her friend; at least she knows society
To need no sleep and walls to be possessed
Of ears; and consequently she is well
Aware how rare is opportunity
Of secret pleasure free from afterthought.
Has, then, the master of the house returned
Before the customary hour, impelled
By slanderers? Or have a waster's taunts,
Despite their callowness, prevailed against
The deference my fruitful prime deserves?
The will, at any rate, is impotent
And has, indeed, been proved a fiction more
Than once. But money talks, and anarchy
Itself is subject to its iron laws.
That is the reason why Marwaris grab
The pledged estates of prodigal Bengal
At auction sales, and none save beggars born
And perverts want a woman run to seed.

VI

Such dreams and resolutions are in vain,
And even vainer is the fear of sure
Senescence whence I seek concealment in
Fragmental recollections conjured out
Of isolating rain by mock revolt.
But history abounds in periods
Of hibernation, when the earth, a lost
Somnambulist, is separated from
The brotherhood of transcendental stars,
And man, imprisoned in the dark night of
The soul, can only chew the poisoned cud
And contemplate the blighted future, like
An augur reading in the innocence

Of birth a sentence of unransomed death.
The certitude of faith deserts him then;
And blind belief informs his panic prayers
To old, indifferent and feeble gods
For congruence and continuity,
As once, unasked, the patriarchs received.
Yet all the while his desolation grows,
And, stranded in an island universe,
He breathes his proper exhalations which
No atmosphere absorbs or animates;
And, though the level heat of entropy—
Incapable of further progress—burns
Him, his impurities are not consumed,
Nor does it warm the introspecting self
Infected with the ague of a world
Extinct. Departed is the inner guide
Today, the outer ghosts have also fled,
Their after-image being all I see:
Old Lenin's mummy wrapt in mysteries
Of Muscovy; undaunted Trotsky felled
By hammer-blows; triumphant Stalin turned
To Hitler's friend; the corpse of Spain; Cathay
Approaching dissolution; headless France
Exhibiting reflexive agony.
Alas, I have no means of finding out
If she is still alive or bombed to dust.

1941

Name

Now you are gone
Even today the longing grows;
Even today I say, and the words beat upon
The ear withdrawn. Now you are gone
My present is
Intolerable aching, vacant is my future;
Even slow death is better
Than your attraction, distant, infinite, neuter.
You hold me captive in this reeling orbit
Where the receding image
Strains my eyes' limit.
Real, in this dreamland of my pain
Where all turns nightmare, you, alone, remain.

Yet my mind
Rejects illusion
Knows you are but reflection, cannot find
A basis for exchange.
You cannot share
My weighted world-line thrusting to despair,
Whose weight will crush me some day and explode
To final dissolution in the void.

Futile, I know, that evening in the wood
When suddenly you stared
Seeing that in my face which brought bright tears
To star your eyes.
Myself, myself, I cheated on that path
With the habitual offering of love,
I came not near your heart, but built
In my own mind a rubbish of lies.
In this same stumbling haste, with eager rose
I've flushed so many maiden cheeks, I know;
For greed of golden apples' easy taking

Reckless of the prohibitive, mordant lightning
This tree I've brought down at your ultimate feet,
Yet in the winds' erosion footprints fade;
This bitter need, too, on the dusty road
Will fade in years to come.

And yet I need you, now, my need extreme.
Today, in this haunted orbit of despair
Which this need mocks,
The infinite anguish there
Fades on the incantation of your name—
Your name—only your name—only your name.

May 15, 1932

Independence Day

I

I do not know what independence means;
And I have still to see the sword recast
As ploughshare. Yet the silly little flags
On bayonets of pickets somehow seemed
To charm away the nightmare that had stalked
Along the dumb streets even yesterday,
Undaunted by the show of naked steel
At crossroads. Anyway, no burning hut
Aspired to paint the skies a measly red;
Incarnadine from votive lamps, they shook
To incantations of the motley crowd
Which had miraculously ceased to be

The fissioned mob, on self-destruction bent,
Inflicting death for fictive death. No doubt,
Such signs are far too null to harbinger
That freedom we who once were young can call
A solace. But the rising sap is not
Our only loss: the years have hollowed out
The ancient world; and while the heavens sag,
The earth is brittle underneath our feet.
So does it matter if events belie
Our expectations buried deep within
The mounting debris of successful wars
And consummated revolutions?

II

Suns
Have set before, and will again decline;
And here, as elsewhere, glory will depart
From power that will then corrupt, until
The stricken hand must let the sceptre pass
To others' grasp, without assaying worth.
There is no cause for grief or joy in these
Rotations. When, however, midnight strikes
Once more, and squalor is restored in place
Of splendour, memory will turn away
From incidentals of eternal flux,
And, seeking consolation, contemplate
An old man's legendary faith. He chose,
As liberty demands, to raise his voice
Above the roar of atom burst, and let
The spirit of man speak through him. The spheres
Lent music to his words, the galaxy
Of seers the overtone; and from his eyes
The vision of Platonic tolerance
Was mirrored back upon the multitude.
All else will crumble into dust; but, should
His name be uttered at the zero hour,

The dream of independence would survive
The ruin of aggressive opulence.

Calcutta, August 21, 1947

The Vagrant

The tree, a shock of red and yellow, shakes its crown;
The parrot hovers, kept from nest;
The year is overblown; the hangdog sun goes down;
And bones, though old, are yet impressed.
The wind alone is loud with distant lamentations—
An infidel intoning runic evocations,
While Time, at wanton play amidst extinct oblations,
Reiterates his ageless jest;
And rid of dust from homing kine, the sky transcends the common noun—
The tree's ambition and the parrot's forfeit nest.

Then all at once, uprushing from the chthonic deep,
The Dark Begetter overwhelms,
The wind grows deathly still, and latitudes of sleep
Disintegrate the charted realms.
Oh, no, the night is not inert: its chronic fever
Breaks out in spangled sweat, as straining at some lever,
It alters far to near; and subtle like the beaver,
The moment makes of fretted elms
An ark for perfect self-assurance. But, involved in whirlwinds sweep,
The parrot strays till Void, triumphant, overwhelms.

March 31, 1956

الرسام الإسلامي

د بلوم كلية الفنون - حائز على ميدالية ذهبية العنوان : اناركلي-لاهور، باكستان